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Art by: **LeSean Thomas**

Letter from the Editor

Opportunity pounds

Technology is the mouse, retail the snake in the grass and I see trouble on the horizon. With video game publishers caught up in the vicious cycle of big money, licenses, and 10-20 hour long games, given the current state of the marketplace, it's going to be harder and harder for anything but the mass market games to perform at retail. In Hollywood a film enjoys months of exclusivity in its theatrical run, where it will usually make the bulk of its money, followed by rental which is like a second life. With games however—retail being the equivalent to a theatrical run—rental is day and date the same and so it cuts into a game's gross. Add to this the limited space and time original games are given on shelves, and you've got a ticking time bomb.

Most of your larger publishers have built behemoth infrastructures setting the bar extremely high for profitability. Gone are the days when sales of 50 to 100 thousand was a success; now it's 500 thousand to a million. As a result, the "bigs" are releasing 50 or more games a year to keep their carriers afloat, so who do you think Wal-Mart and Best Buy and so forth are going to give multiple pockets to? You think they stock by what games are good? That space is divvied out by profit per square foot, so they go with what they know is a lock (Madden, GTA, select movie titles, etc.), which stifles creativity. You can still find a copy of Ralph Bakshi's *Wizards* from 1977 in the DVD section, but try finding last year's sleeper PS2 hit… You think Best Buy cared that Psychonauts was a critical slam dunk? And so great original games are getting harder and harder to squeeze in. What scares me, however, is when the super stores start talking about carrying used games. If the game industry allows this to happen, we may as well plug our old consoles back in because it would all but slaughter originality.

But I've beaten the whole retail debacle to death. The point I want to make is this: Why doesn't someone start a shop where the overhead is conducive to million-dollar-or-less-budget games that take 12-18 months to make, are 3-5 hours or so long and so fun we'll play them over and over—you know, like the old days? Remember games like Super Metroid, Castlevania SotN, Earth Worm Jim, Magician Lord, Contra, Ghouls 'n' Ghosts, Gunstar Heroes, Ranger X, and on and on? Imagine this type of awesome 2D gameplay in lush 3D environments, only twice as long. I've spoken with several fed-up producers who say that these types of games, making full use of next-gen technology, could be created in 12-18 months for 1-2 million apiece. This would almost negate the need for conventional retail. Such a publisher could make an exclusive deal with one retailer and/or sell direct online. How many of the hundred of thousands of old-school gamers wouldn't pay $29.99 for a next gen Metal Slug, Strider, or Kid Icarus-type game? They'd likely pre-book enough copies to cover dev costs before they even wrapped the project. Better yet, license anime franchises: They possess the best character design in all the land, are affordable, and have a built-in following. Playing Sonic Rush, it all came rushing back to me… Oh yeah, we were waiting for the next generation of 2D… When did we lose sight of that? Sure these games are enjoying bids on handheld and I'm elated (I play DS more than console these days) but I want Xbox 360, PS3, and Revolution versions of 2D games…Imagining where today's visionaries could take 2D gameplay on next gen keeps me awake at night. It would also assure the survival of originality and allow so many disgusted producers to foster a small (avant-garde, if you will) studio system. If I wasn't knee deep publishing, I'd do it myself. (If I ever move on from publishing, you'll know where to find me.)

Meanwhile, there's nothing more exciting in a gamer's life than a new piece of hardware, and the Xbox 360 launch is significant as it's the first to reach out beyond core gamers. It will be interesting to see how deep the rabbit hole goes. In the meantime, I'll be over here with Kameo; let me know how that pans out.

Dave Halverson Editor In Chief

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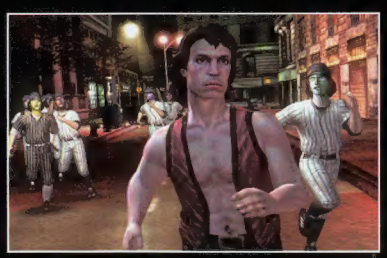

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Blood
Intense Violence
Sexual Themes
Strong Language
Use of Drugs and Alcohol

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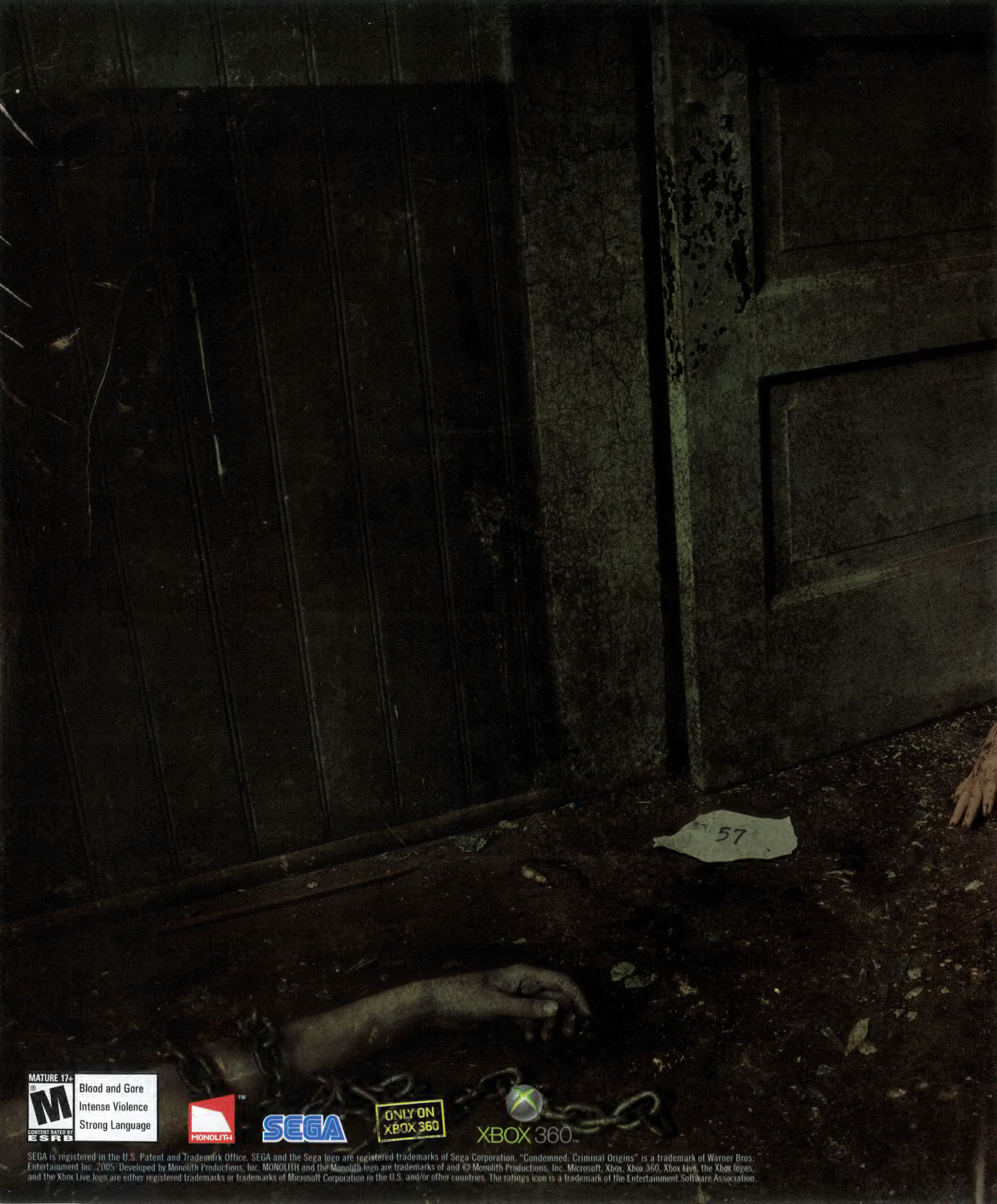

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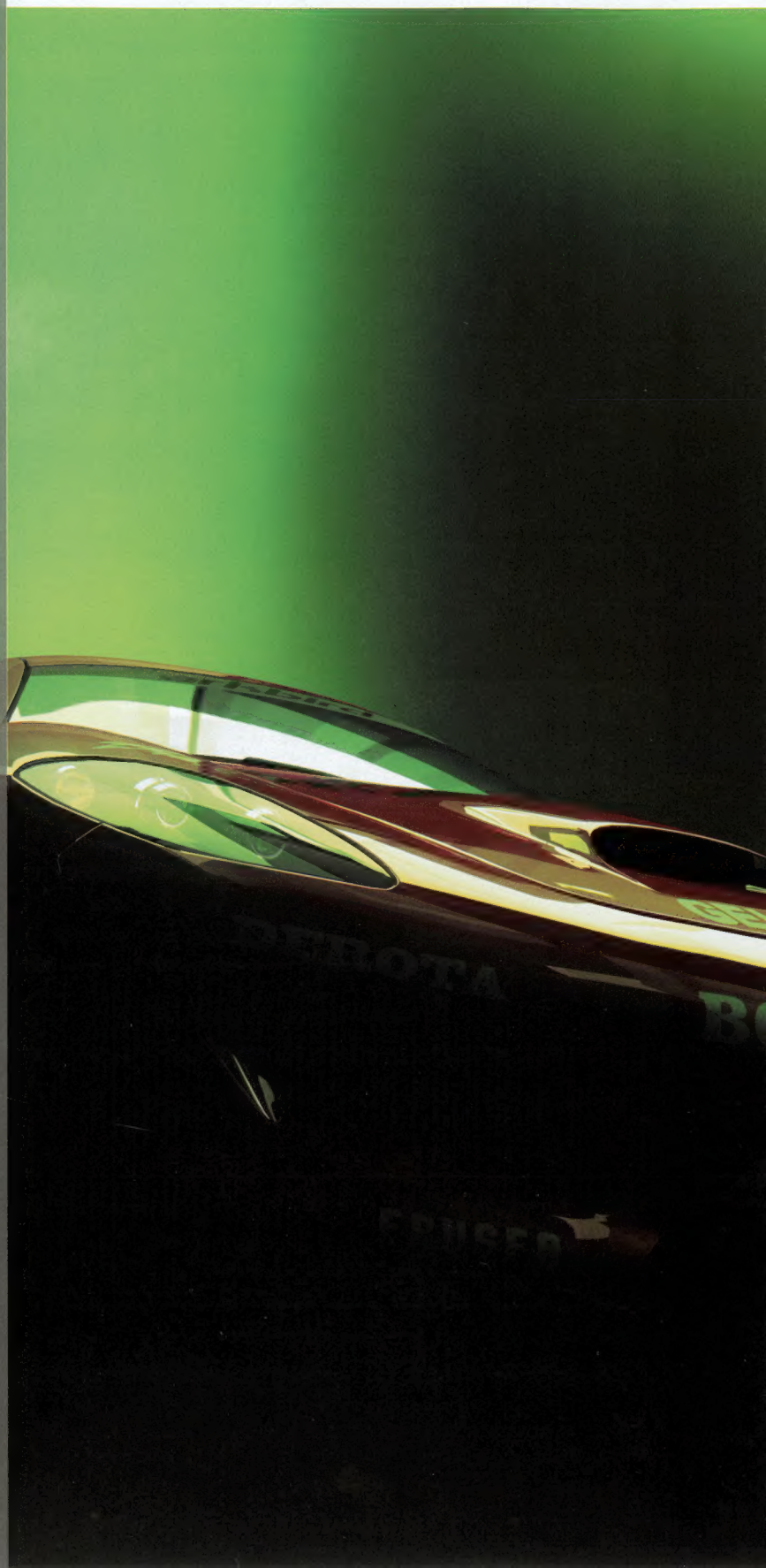

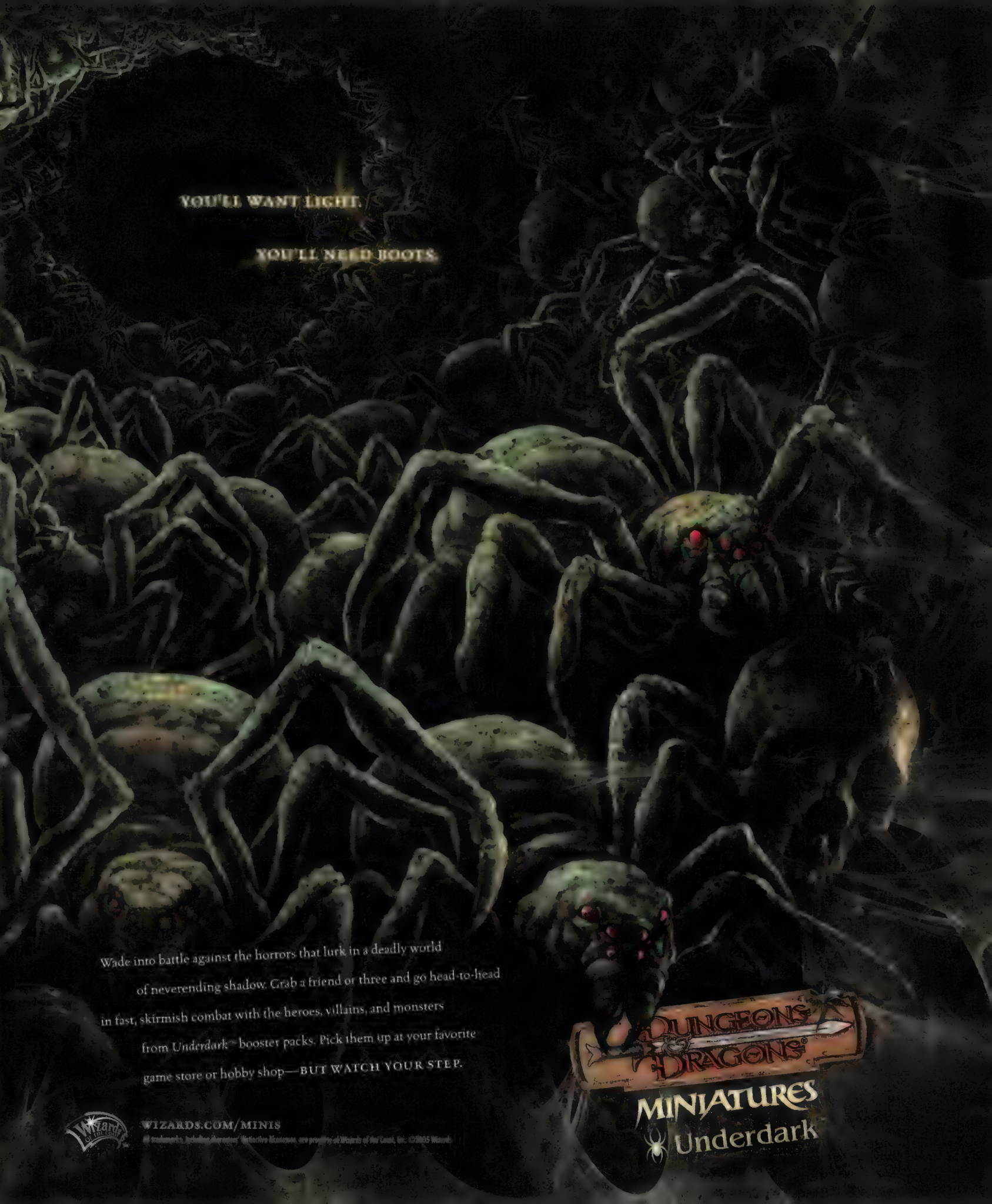

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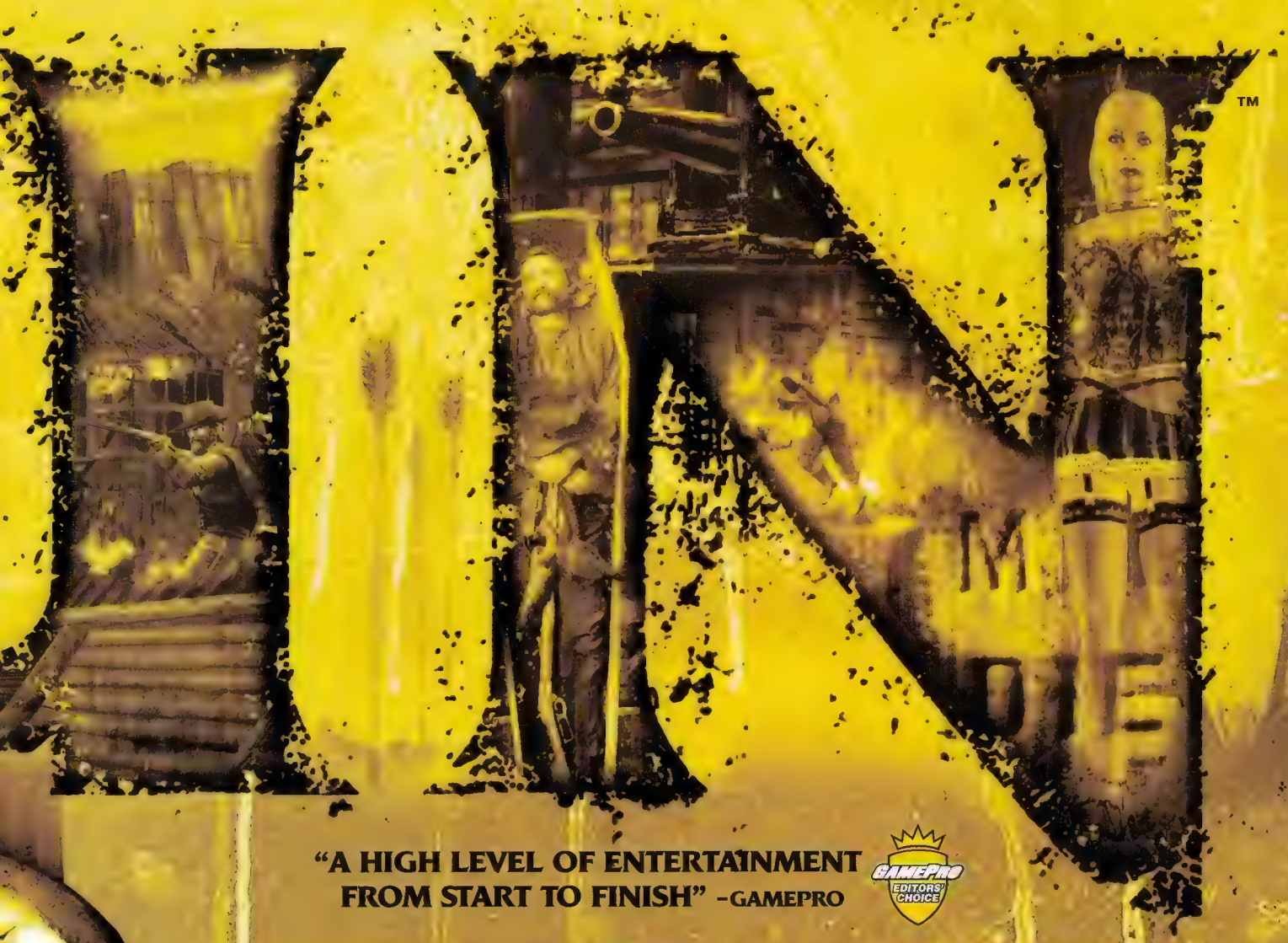

"A HIGH LEVEL OF ENTERTAINMENT FROM START TO FINISH" -GAMEPRO

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playback

December 2005

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LETTER OF THE MONTH

No HD for me

First, let me say that I love your magazine, keep up the good work. Ok, so on to my letter. The next next generation of game consoles is almost upon us, with the Xbox 360 close at hand. And I'm sure most of you know that it's coming in two varieties. I can only assume that the PS3 will do something similar. Both consoles want to basically become the new PC but I'm not sure I want that. The one thing that separates PC and home console gaming is the fact that everyone with the same console and game will have the exact same gameplay experience. You can have a bigger TV or surround sound but the play is the same. It seems to me that the next generation is looking to change that. Are we going in a direction where you won't be able to play certain games without an HDTV and a hard drive? Where the games you play are decided by the bells and whistles you do or don't have?

Gashi

Not to worry; publishers will always accommodate the gamut of users. The goal isn't to replace the PC; it's to surpass it in every way where entertainment is concerned. To do that Manufacturers and Publishers need to, and will serve the widest range of customers they possibly can. Just don't expect an RF adaptor.

The art of the game

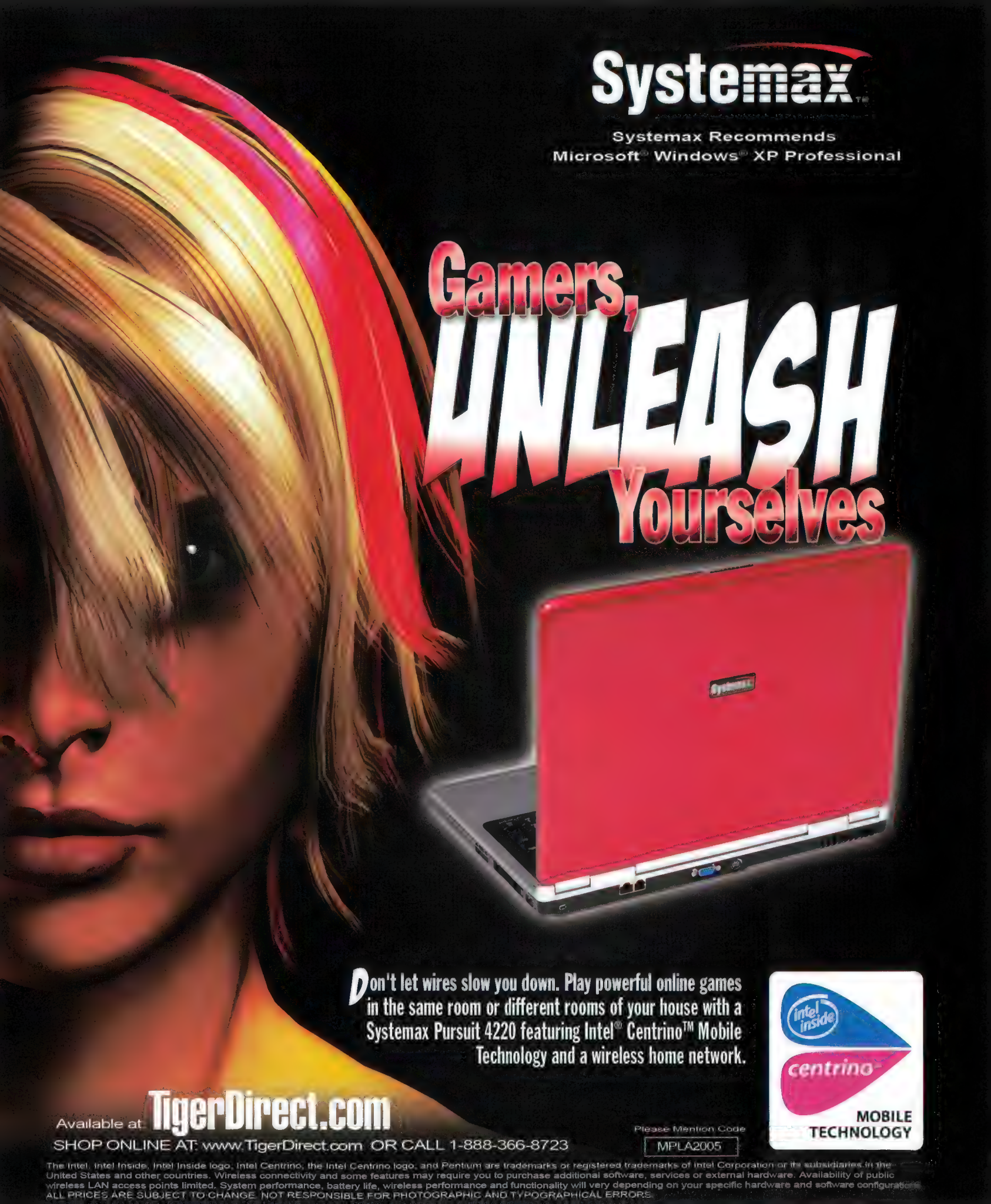
All the political hoopla and media sensationalism surrounding sex (and violence, but mostly dirty evil sex) in videogames doesn't really concern me. It's just showing me that the politicians of today and people currently running the media are aging and out of touch. Human beings have always demonized what they don't understand, and with time the younger folks with more relevant perspectives and progressive attitudes will pave the way, snuffing out anachronistic resistance. However, this does not mean we shouldn't take any responsibility for the content of videogames — those under fire as well as those known and loved only by the inner circles of the subculture. I'm not necessarily talking about things like sex and violence; if we've got games rated 'M' and the people selling these games are doing everything they can to keep them out of the hands of the under-aged, that's all the responsibility we're obligated to take. Anything beyond that and the responsibility falls *solely* on the parents (or grandparents, as the case may be) buying these games for their children despite the rating. Anyway, I digress; what does it matter when we're essentially shielding ourselves from America's ignorance and distorted morality? What does concern me is something of greater importance, in the scheme of things. We all know that videogames have taken great strides in becoming more than just games or passive entertainment — in becoming, at their best, veritable art. A beautiful title like *Ico* is just one lofty example of this. Still, videogames seem to be quagmired in a stage of adolescence. They often lack the maturity and world-consciousness that fuel music, film, literature (including comic books), and other established media. There is certainly a handful of more esoteric and thought-provoking games out there (*Xenogears*, *Beyond Good and Evil*, and the *Shin Megami Tensei* series, for example), but the vast majority is still fantasy fluff and glossy decadence, only contributing to the artform's stunted growth. Do I care about *GTA*? After the initial few moments of, "Wow, I have so much *freedom*," it's a very dull game. Do I care about *Sly 3*? Maybe if I were so bored with life that I found the 'furry' subculture relevant or meaningful (or, uh, anything but an obscure and bizarre side effect of white privilege even scarier than Renaissance fairs). I want to play games that elevate my consciousness. And I'm not just complaining — there are plenty of titles out there that appeal to me. I just think we could do more. The problem, if you ask me, is that the videogame industry is so mainstream and console-competitive. It doesn't have the layers that the music or film industries do; i.e. there are no real equivalents to "indie" or *avant-garde* in the videogame world, and this not only hampers creativity, but in fact encourages homogeneity. The closest we get is something like *Killer7*, *Katamari Damacy*, or *Shadow of the Colossus* (with no disrespect to these brilliant games or their creators). Nintendo is constantly innovating gameplay, but mostly within already popular franchises. Videogames, even with all their advancements, are far too convention-oriented.

I bring this up because I feel videogames could be on the verge of blooming into something higher. There is so much potential for expression there, and it's only barely being tapped. I love my *Zelda* and *Metal Gear* as much as anyone else, and believe me, I have a major soft spot for the classic essence of video*gaming*, but I'm not content with watching all these "urban/crime" turds or tired old cutesy critter platformers pile up. As one with a passion for the sublime experience that I know videogames can deliver, I want more. I want to see the limits pushed far beyond anything heretofore imagined. I think Nintendo is on to something with the Revolution controller, which, ideally, will open up new vistas and plant the seeds for new genres to be cultivated. It's up to the developers, but I can't help but feel that fans, such as myself, need to speak up.

I hope I'm not alone in this...

Brian W

We also read your aside after you read Brady's Back of the Book, so you know you're not alone. My editorial this issue touches on this as well. Publishers need to look beyond massive budgets and safe licenses in order for gaming to fully develop. That said we still love a good cartoon universe, and likely always will. Here's to a future where gaming is more like music...only without all the illegal downloading.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INDEPENDENTS' DAY

GarageGames promises a new deal for small developers

The Eugene, OR-based GarageGames does not publish triple-A titles, nor does it develop them. What it does, and what it has done since its founding in 1999, is offer small and independent developers the opportunity to make their own games and see them to market. The company offers a set of game development tools—known as Torque—for prices ranging from $100w to $995, as well as series of distribution plans to help bring titles to the market.

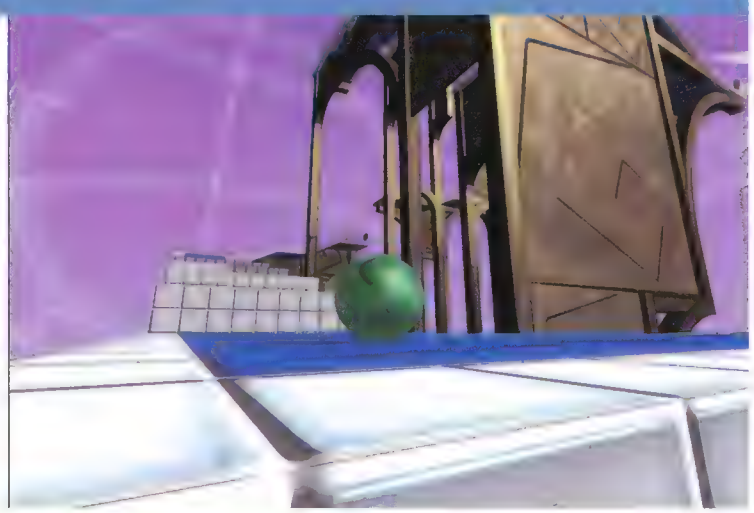
"GarageGames is a unique Internet publishing label for independent games and game makers," the company's Web site (www.garagegames.com) states. "We are a band of professional game makers committed to publishing truly original and exciting titles on our own terms. We want to give any and all game makers the opportunity to publish their games, find their audiences—and perhaps make their fortunes."

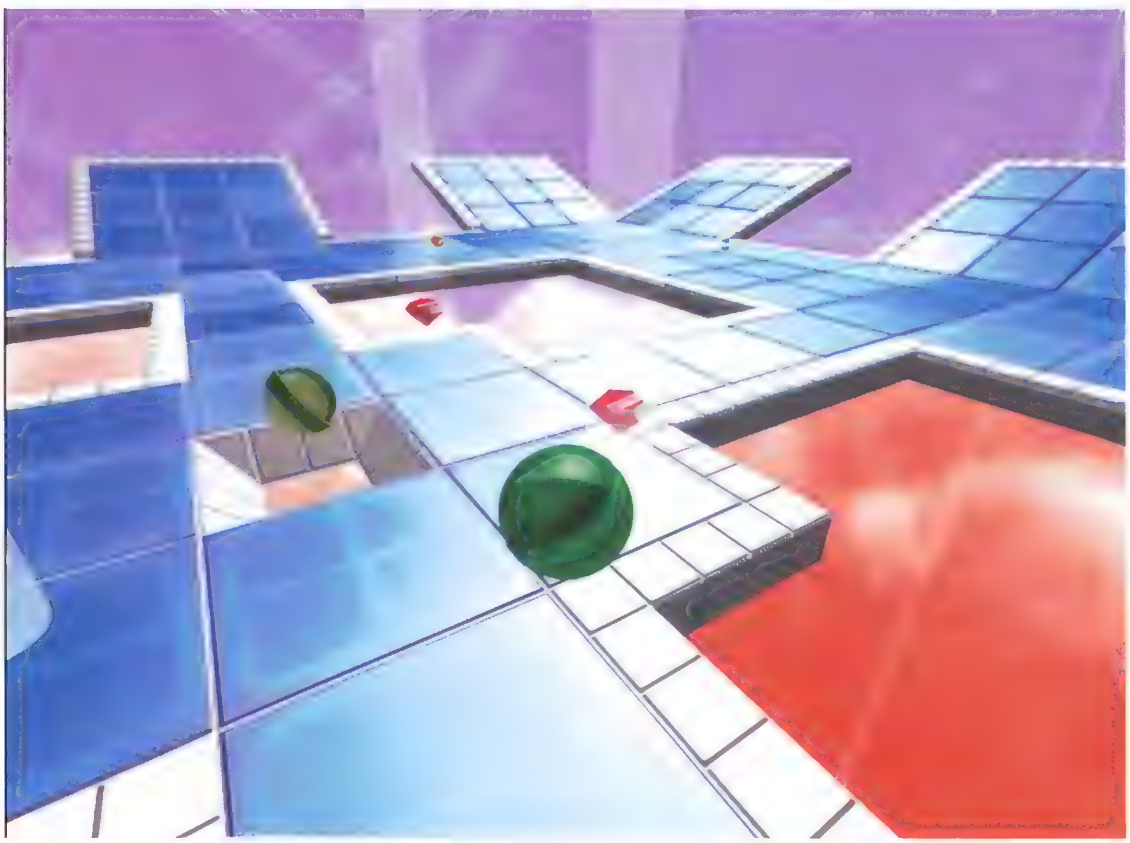
Jay Moore, GarageGames' evangelist says his company wants to foster an independent movement within the video game industry. To facilitate this, the company wants to make—and help others create—games that are both economically viable in terms of development costs and, simply, fun to play in and of themselves. "If it's not fun, it's not going to sell," he says.

The company has already released a series of games, including Think Tanks, Mutant Storm, Orbz, and Zap! for Windows and Macintosh. The GarageGames-developed Marble Blast debuted on Microsoft's Live Arcade service in May 2005. Its sequel Marble Blast Ultra has recently been released for the Xbox 360's Live Arcade.

Ultra, which features 60 single-player courses and 8-player action over Xbox Live, tasks players with guiding a marble through a series of increasingly difficult arenas a la the classic Atari arcade game Marble Madness. Special powerups turn a marble into a flying machine or wrecking ball of sorts capable of knocking enemy marbles off ledges, and special surfaces provide varying levels of friction, Marbles can jump across platforms and invert themselves on walls and ceilings by making contact with gravity-altering icons. Trap doors, elevators, moving platforms, steep inclines, treacherous curves, and loop-de-loops provide players with both a means to quickly move their marble to the finish and send it off into the unforgiving void.

The company plans to expand its toolsets to include such platforms as PlayStation 2 and various handhelds, Moore says. For now, he notes Microsoft has done a fine job embracing independent game developers with its Xbox Live Arcade service.





GarageGames
Changing the way games are made and played

A NEW CELL FOR FISHER

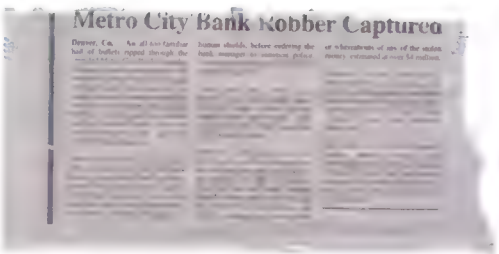
Splinter Cell 4 introduces jailbird Sam?

ARMED BANK ROBBERY
SUSPECT
Description: White male, dark colored hair - short length, approximately 5'11" tall. 180 pounds, 40 to 50 years of age. Last seen wearing black jeans, tan t-shirt, and black knit cap.
Details: Suspect wanted in connection with a string of armed robberies throughout Phoenix, AR. and Denver, CO. Suspect is armed with a high caliber, fully automatic weapon. In each case, suspect has fled on foot and eluded capture.

Say it ain't so, Sam.

The teaser Web site for Ubisoft's Tom Clancy's Splinter Cell 4 (http://www.bewaresamfisher.com/us/) more than hints at a new direction for the venerable third- and first-person perspective stealth-action series. More curiously, it suggests protagonist Sam Fisher has gone off the deep end and committed a series of violent bank robberies.

Included on the site is Fisher's discharge notice from government spy group Third Echelon, as well as an obituary



for his daughter Sarah. A series of blog entries posted by the anonymous Dana aka "Full_Court_Press" gives hints as to Fisher's new and highly bizarre career as a bank robber. The entries state he robbed banks without using a mask, never took out bank security cameras, always escaped on foot, and was eventually nabbed red-handed after sacking a bank in Denver, Colorado. At his arraignment, the blog states, Fisher plead guilty to 36 counts of armed robbery. A hand-written, classified psychological profile states he's "Seemingly undisturbed by the resulting numbers of civilian fatalities."

A cryptic message on the site, one recorded by Michael Ironside, the voice for Sam Fisher states, "You have no idea what's coming. This is Sam Fisher. I'll be the one you're looking for." A phone number has also been included on the site, with people urged to call 1-877-SF1SHER from their mobile phones.

Ubisoft representatives had no comment except to suggest Sam Fisher is going through some tough times. Splinter Cell 4 has been scheduled for release on next-generation consoles in spring 2006.

HOP ON OVER AND BE HEARD

Be a part of influencing the next big MMO

The people over at FrogHop Inc. want you to know that your opinions matter—a lot. To the extent that they would like to invite Play Magazine readers to participate in an exclusive online survey to voice your opinions on their revolutionary new technology for wireless MMO gameplay. Whether you play MMOs or not, or plan to in the future its a few minutes well spent. Whenever a company refers to you as "influencers and early adopters" you should heed their call. In a perfect world more game publishers would follow suit rather then order punch and popcorn for a room full of focus groupies. Follow the green rabbit. www.froghop.net/play

Froghop

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Before you jump on eBay or trek to your local retail shop to unload your used CDs, DVDs and video games, take a look at the very slick, just-in-time-for-Xmas-madness SPUN.COM. While this new online store does sell new and used products through traditional means, what makes it so unique is that you can sell your old stuff as well as make trade-ins for credit towards future purchases. It's kind of like a recycling shop, where you could conceivably go cash-free for your exchanges indefinitely. To help keep the process as efficient and convenient as possible, SPUN.COM will send you your order in a box with pre-paid shipping, which can be used to return whatever it is you're selling back or trading in. Credit is instant too, so you can have your new order shipped to you before you send your old stuff out to complete the exchange. The first of its kind on the web, SPUN.COM is an addictive new way to shop.

SOUNDS OF THE UNDEAD

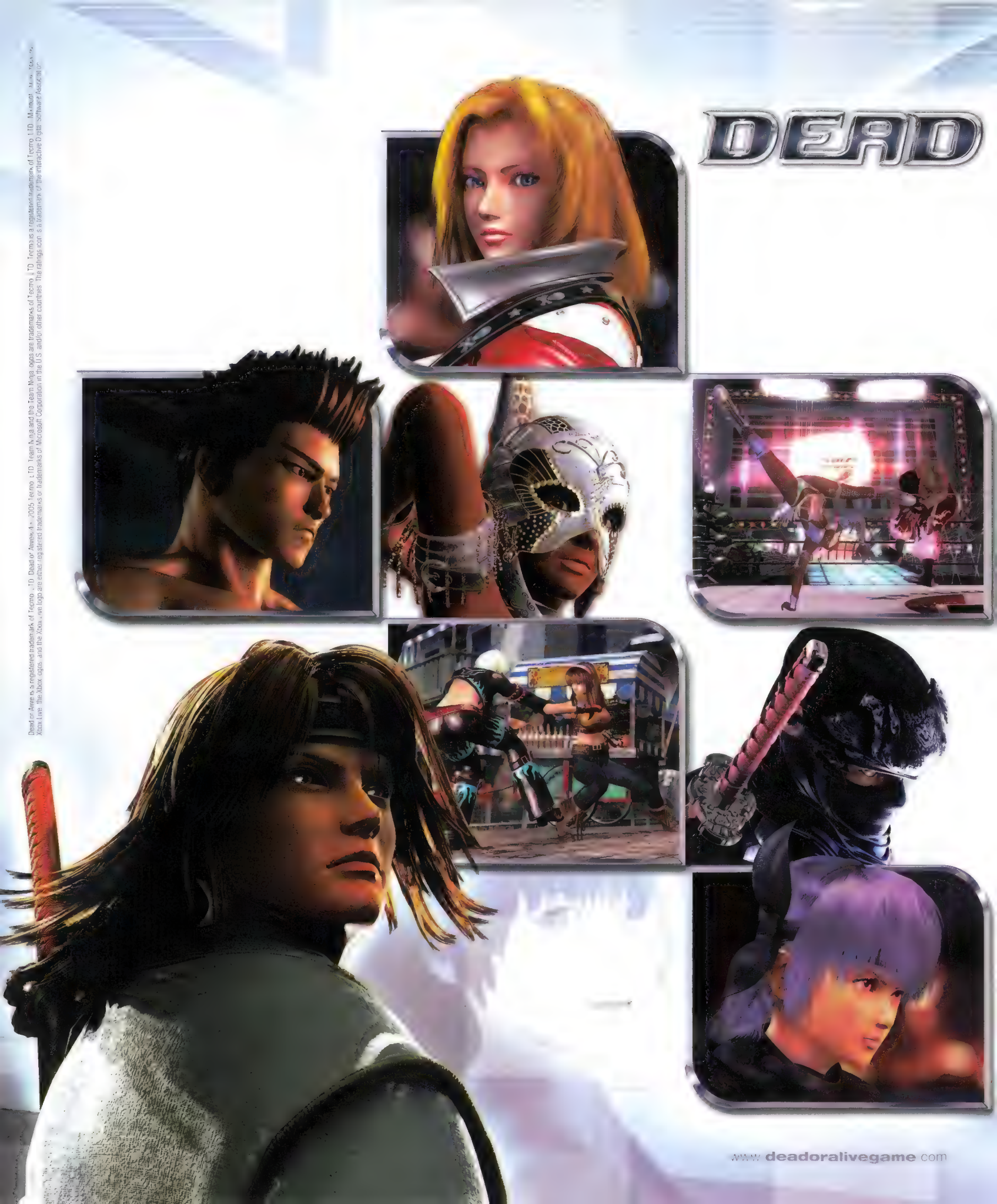
Stubbs Soundtrack A 'Monster' Mash

It's odd to think most of the songs included in Stubbs the Zombie: The Soundtrack don't actually appear in the Xbox game Stubbs The Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse. The few songs that do appear in the game are relegated to the introduction screen, a brief jukebox segment, and a dance-off featuring the protagonist zombie Stubbs and a stalwart police chief.

Simply, this is criminal, as the Stubbs' soundtrack is perhaps the greatest collection of music to almost wholly not appear in a video game. Shout Factory Records and game makers Aspyr and Wideload have concocted a monster of an ass-stomping album.

Here, 1950s pop classics Lollipop, My Boyfriend's Back, Lonesome Town, Earth Angel, and Mr. Sandman and others are reworked by modern artists. The results are impressive; setting The Dandy Warhols (whose song Used to Be Friends serves as the theme song for the TV show Veronica Mars) on the Everly Brothers' All I Have to do is Dream is a master stroke. Similarly inspired reworkings of Strangers in the Night and Tears on My Pillow are turned in by Cake and The Flaming Lips respectively.

Music this good shouldn't stay buried. The 13-track Stubbs the Zombie Soundtrack is the best piece of game-themed music to come out this year. Bar none.



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Official Xbox Magazine

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Game Informer

"From the characters to the incredibly diverse and interactive environments, the game oozes with cinematic flair and appeal."
GamePro.com

"The high-definition visuals are arguably the best we've seen on the 360."
TeamXbox.com

XBOX 360

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Virgin Megastore Top Ten

01	**50 Cent** vu games / xb, ps2
02	**GTA: Liberty City Stories** rockstar / psp
03	**The Warriors** rockstar / ps2, xb
04	**Star Wars Battlefront II** novalogic / lucasarts
05	**Kameo: Elements of Power** microsoft / xbox 360
06	**From Russia With Love** ea / ps2
07	**Dragon Quest VIII** square enix / ps2
08	**Matrix: Path of Neo** atari / ps2, xbox
09	**Resident Evil 4** capcom / ps2
10	**Perfect Dark Zero** microsoft / xbox 360

NPD/TRSTS Top Ten May Game Sales

01	**Madden NFL 06** ea / ps2
02	**NBA Live 06** ea / ps2
03	**Mario Superstars Baseball** nintendo / gc
04	**Madden NFL 06** ea / xb
05	**TC's Rainbow Six: Lockdown** ubisoft / xb
06	**NASCAR Total Team** Control ea / ps2
07	**Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06** ea / ps2
08	**WWE Day of Reckoning** thq / gc
09	**Nintendogs Chihuahua & Friends** nintendo / ds
10	**Burnout Revenge** ea / xb

Your Megastore Beckons!

Kameo
microsoft / xbox 360

We have lift off! The next generation has arrived complete with one of the most breathtaking action adventures ever created.

Dragon Quest VIII
square-enix / ps2

The epitome of traditional turned based RPGs, this all new 3D DQ is one of the highlights of the entire year.

Condemned
sega / xbox 360

Someone special is waiting for you... The Xbox 360 is almost here. Let the next generation begin.

Top 5 Now Playing and Reader Selections

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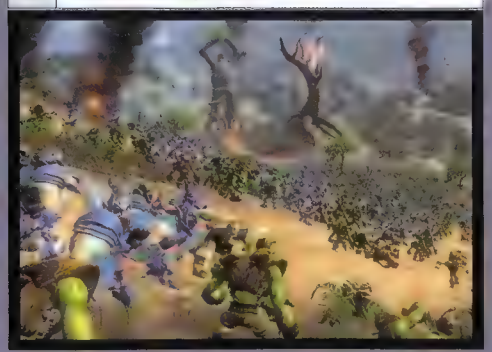
Readers' Most Wanted database@playmagazine.com

01	**Kameo: Elements of Power** microsoft / xbox 360
02	**Perfect Dark Zero** microsoft / xbox 360
03	**Legend of Zelda: Twilight Princess** nintendo / gc
04	**Final Fantasy XII** square enix / ps2
05	**Condemned** sega / xbox 360

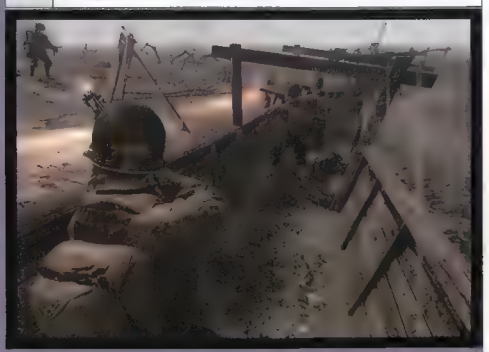


Dave Halverson editor in chief

01	**Kameo: Elements of Power** microsoft / xbox 360
02	**Sonic Rush** sega / nintendo ds
03	**Condemned** sega / xbox 360
04	**Need for Speed MW** ea / xbox 360
05	**Perfect Dark Zero** microsoft / xbox 360

Brady Fiechter executive editor

01	**Call of Duty 2** activision / xbox 360
02	**Condemned** sega / xbox 360
03	**Gunstar Super Heroes** sega / gba
04	**Mario Baseball** nintendo / gc
05	**Ridge Racer 6** namco / xbox 360



Greg Orlando associate editor

01	**GTA: Liberty City Stories** rockstar / psp
02	**Phoenix Wright: Ace Attorney** capcom / ds
03	**Shattered Union** 2k games / xbox
04	**We Heart Katamari** namco / ps2
05	**The Warriors** microsoft / xb

Michael Hobbs art director

01	**Shadow of the Colossus** sony / ps2
02	**Ridge Racer 6** namco / xbox 360
03	**Mario Kart DS** nintendo / ds
04	**Call of Duty 2** activision / xbox 360
05	**Condemned** sega / xbox 360

Ashley Esqueda editor

01	**Castlevania: Dawn of Sorrow** konami / ds
02	**Shadow of the Colossus** sony / ps2
03	**Star Wars Battlefront II** lucasarts / xbox
04	**Star Wars Galaxies** lucasarts / pc
05	**We Love Katamari** namco / ps2

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The new work of Eisner winning writer

words [illegible]

Reach out and crush someone.

Stop me if you've heard this one. Badass military hero guy—infallible, one-dimensional, boring, predictable badass military hero guy—walks into a room and shoots stuff. He likely "has a bad feeling about this" and continues to shoot more stuff. We call this the first-person shooter, and Human Head, the developers of Prey, have now asked me to stop, interjecting with what we so desperately need interjected in this authoritative yet obnoxiously clichéd genre. "We're tired of this!" exclaims Tim Gerritsen, Human Head Chairman/CEO. "[Prey's] not just a first-person shooter where you put the typical generic soldier into a role, give him a gun and have him blast everything there is. There is progression to you as the character and you get to deeply play that part."

"There are some heavy emotional scenes we're trying to put in the game," adds Chris Rhinehart, project lead. "We don't want to give away too much. Too often we know so much about a game, by the time you actually start playing there's no surprise… But we've really spent a considerable amount of time on the actual script and the story, reworking it, adding to it. But that's all I'm really gonna say on that."

Fair enough. What little is known about the story concerns what is indeed one of the more intriguing (reluctant) heroes for a first-person shooter—Tommy, a Native American who struggles to accept his culture and heritage. After a brief stint with the Army, he returns to the reservation to be with his girlfriend, desperately seeking to woo her away to travel the world and leave everything that defines them behind.

There's rich opportunity here for us to respond to a protagonist with genuine emotion, a persona of evocative character and humanity that reaches beyond the cold heart of the typical action-game hero. From the start of my conversation with Human Head, I was excited by the possibility of a real look inside the soul of Tommy's existence—to play a killer action game where the killing carried a price. "The spiritual theme absolutely plays a strong role in the story," says Rhinehart. "We have approached the Native American subject matter with seriousness as we've crafted the story. The overall story has strong themes of love and responsibility... of course, along with the dark sci-fi and horror elements. The alien elements blend with the Native American elements to create a very unique feel. I'm looking forward to people's reactions to what we're trying to achieve here."

As the game opens, Tommy's hanging out with his grandfather and girlfriend in the bar where she works, the Road House. This is where the alien part of the story rears its nasty head and Tommy's duty as savior begins. Hovering above Earth is a moon-

We have approached the Native American subject matter with seriousness as we've crafted the story."
Chris Rhinehart

sized sphere run by a race of destroyers, their unending mission to pass by planets containing life and vacuum up everything in their wake. On this particular day, it's human cargo the aliens are after, and Tommy just happens to be in the epicenter of one of their runs. And not too stoked about the results. "Our tagline for the game is, Earth's savior doesn't want the job," laughs Rhinehart. "He's not just an ass-kicker, he's not just gonna go in and save the day. He doesn't want to be on the sphere, he's like you or me. If we were abducted, we wouldn't want to be there… Basically, Tommy's motivation is that he wants to find his girlfriend and just get off the sphere. He's not out to save the world."

Sure, but then there's that slight problem of self-preservation we humans hold quite dear. "The player's about to be used as food but he manages to escape. The sphere just doesn't care: it's another human who got lost, the Hunters will find it and kill it," explains Rhinehart. "But as you go through the game, you start to get in the sphere's way. As you continue to survive and keep going, the sphere starts to take notice of your interesting abilities."

One of these important abilities is known as the spirit walk, which shifts Tommy into an alternate plane of existence, opening up

Looks like he'll be having the crab.

new avenues of exploration. Defeating an enemy releases its soul, which feeds shots for a bow that becomes the singular weapon for offense in the spirit realm. Combat plays a part in these sequences, but the puzzle solving is what really takes on a new dimension. Once Tommy separates from his body—pay attention to where you leave his vulnerable physical form to rest—he can float through barriers, cross platforms that reconstruct, manipulate devices and find new openings of progression in an effort to clear a path for his return to physical form. "What we really want to do with the central mechanic of spirit walking is play it up as much as we can in really intelligent ways that make sense," emphasizes Rhinehart. "You'll deal with stuff like plasma leaks, environmental hazards, stuff that registers in the setting."

Paying attention to your surroundings is obviously important, and this includes enemy interaction. For example, in one intense face-off with a giant pod-like creature that imprisons Tommy in its tentacles, you can pull out of Tommy's body and shoot the creature while spirit walking, forcing it to drop your form for a safe return.

While this particular encounter involved one of the indigenous entities on the sphere, the enemies in the game aren't all consigned to the alien template. Some are victims left to helplessly roam the sphere, like the creepy

"It is a very strange, very inhospitable place in which Tommy has been imprisoned."

wraiths, who have a tendency to possess young children in a very violent, disturbing manner. "The wraiths actually have a bit of a backstory within the game, which is [eventually] revealed," Rhinehart points out. "It's a spoiler, though, so I don't want to reveal that here."

Other nasty adversaries include the Hunter and the Harvester: "two of my favorite enemies in the game," says Rhinehart. "The Hunter is the base grunt of the game; their strength is the wide variety of abilities they possess. They are pretty inteligent, being aware of such things as cover points, health items, and environmental hazards. The Hunters know to run to cover instead of remaining exposed. When damaged, they will flee for health—taking the same health the player uses. They're pretty skillful at throwing explosive devices at the player and also can snipe at great distances... The Hunters also are aware of other Hunters nearby and will modify their attacks based upon the presence of other allies."

"The Harvester, he has the ability to climb right into certain sections of the walls to flee from you for a moment to re-heal himself. If you manage to damage him until he starts fleeing, it becomes a race against time to take him out before he reaches those special walls."

This isn't not your typical alien ship. Joining those special walls are the ones where you can gravity walk, defying physics as you move up and down select paths throughout the sphere, battling enemies above and below in entirely new dimensions of gameplay. There's not a single ladder to be found in this world, but not just because of the ability to scale walls and ceilings; gravity shifting also comes into play, during which the room is in effect turned on its side, sometimes spilling contents and enemies along with it. If you position yourself just right, you can send a creature careening to its death with the simple reverse of a switch.

Imagine how all this plays out over the Net. Human Head's not divulging much on their online maps, but what I saw looked intense, what with all the gravity manipulation and wall walking going down. "You have to be aware of what's going on all around you," says Rhinehart. "A guy could be running above you, could be right next to you on the wall, you could be on the ceiling and drop in. We have some that focus more on spherical gravity stuff. A number that are straight run-and-gun maps."

Gravity shifting evolved from the idea of flipping the level entirely upside down and playing through large parts of it on the ceiling. "From there we altered the code so gravity could be oriented in any direction," Rhinehart points out. "After that worked,

then we added spherical gravity—the player can run around on the outside, or inside, of a large sphere. Using this we can have the player fighting on the outside of a small planetoid."

Portals are another component in Prey that place a cool spin on locomotion. These rips in space will open up at random points, transporting enemies for surprise attacks. You can shoot through the opening to target anything moving on the other side, and if you're quick enough, dart through to access another area of the sphere. Sometimes the portals aren't so obvious: you may walk through one and not even realize it.

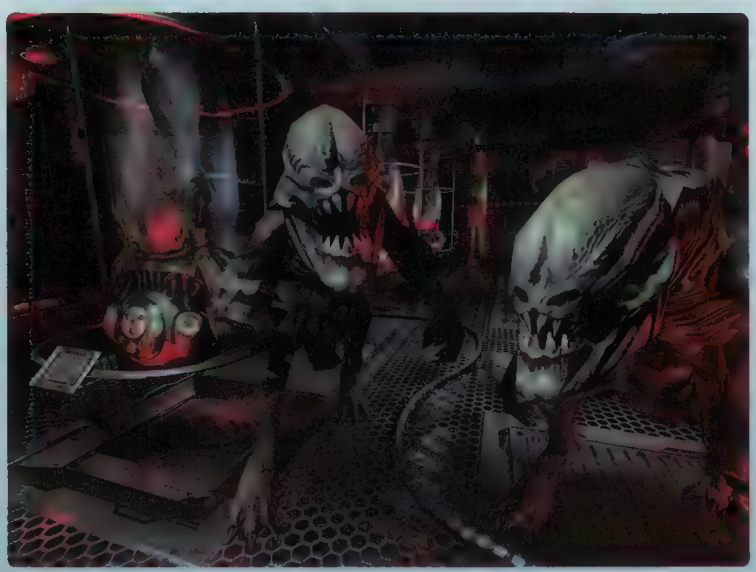
"We tried to pick a couple of real core gameplay elements, gravity being one, spirit walk, wall walk, and we try to take all those and each in their own way is its own simple mechanic, but when you mix them together you get a lot more complex environments," explains Rhinehart. "Are you a fan of Zelda? Miyamoto does that so well, Link has one particular tool he gets and he can use it a certain a way but they just build it to be used a zillion different ways. Here's a new puzzle, here's a new way of using what you've got. I'm a big fan of that, so we are trying to structure our puzzles like that."

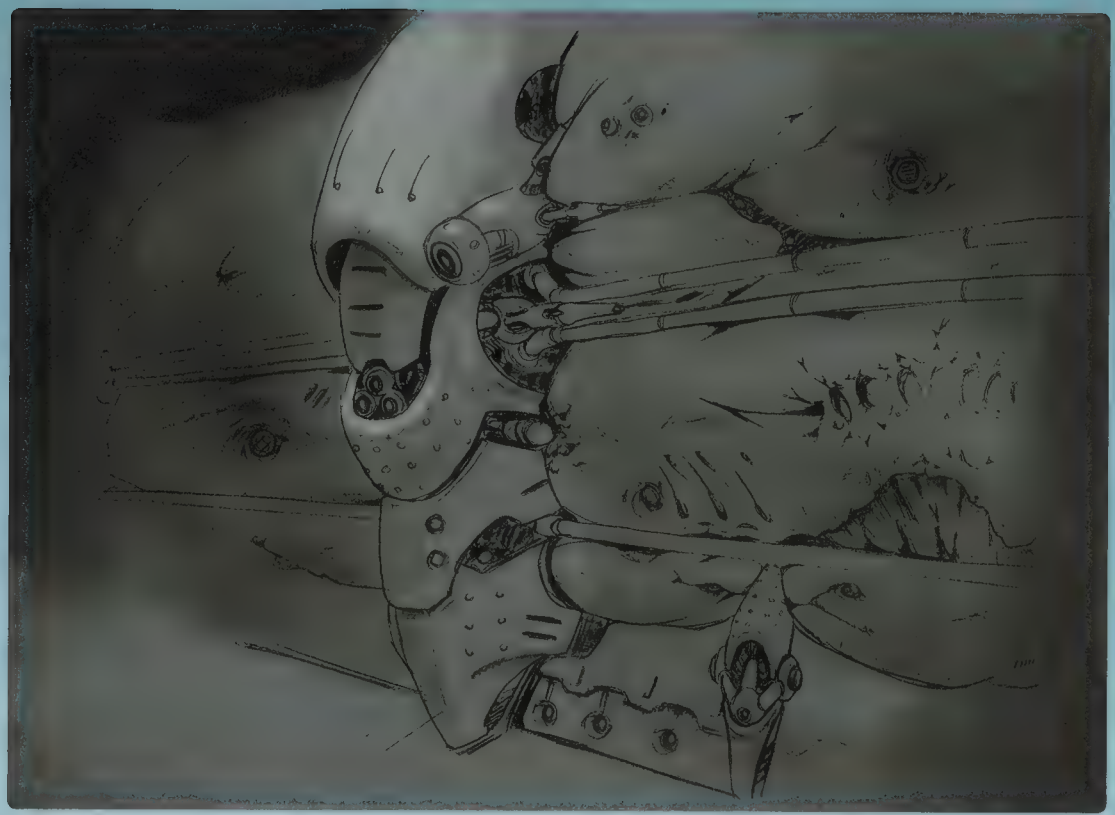
The number being thrown around to describe the ratio of action to puzzles is about 60/40. For that action quotient, Tommy's fully locked and loaded without the designers getting too nuts with their form and function. "Each of the weapons has a real-world analog, so you can latch onto psychological," explains Gerritsen. "'Yeah, I know what it does, it's kind of like a rifle or shotgun, it's kind of like a machine gun.' We didn't want to create weapons that were just so weird they ended up not being fun because you couldn't get into what the thing does in the game world."

One of the more interesting weapons involves a leach mechanism, which siphons energy from nodes in the sphere, powering it up accordingly. Some weapons are derived from living parts, like the crawler launcher, which shoots out tiny creatures as ammo. They also come in handy as shields, exploding into a temporary safety cloud if the situation calls for it.

Not entirely alone in his quest, Tommy explores with the aid of the spirit of his childhood pet hawk, Talon, who takes over when firepower alone is not enough by distracting the opposition. The bird is also helpful in translating alien speech and text inscribed on doors and objects.

It is a very strange, very inhospitable



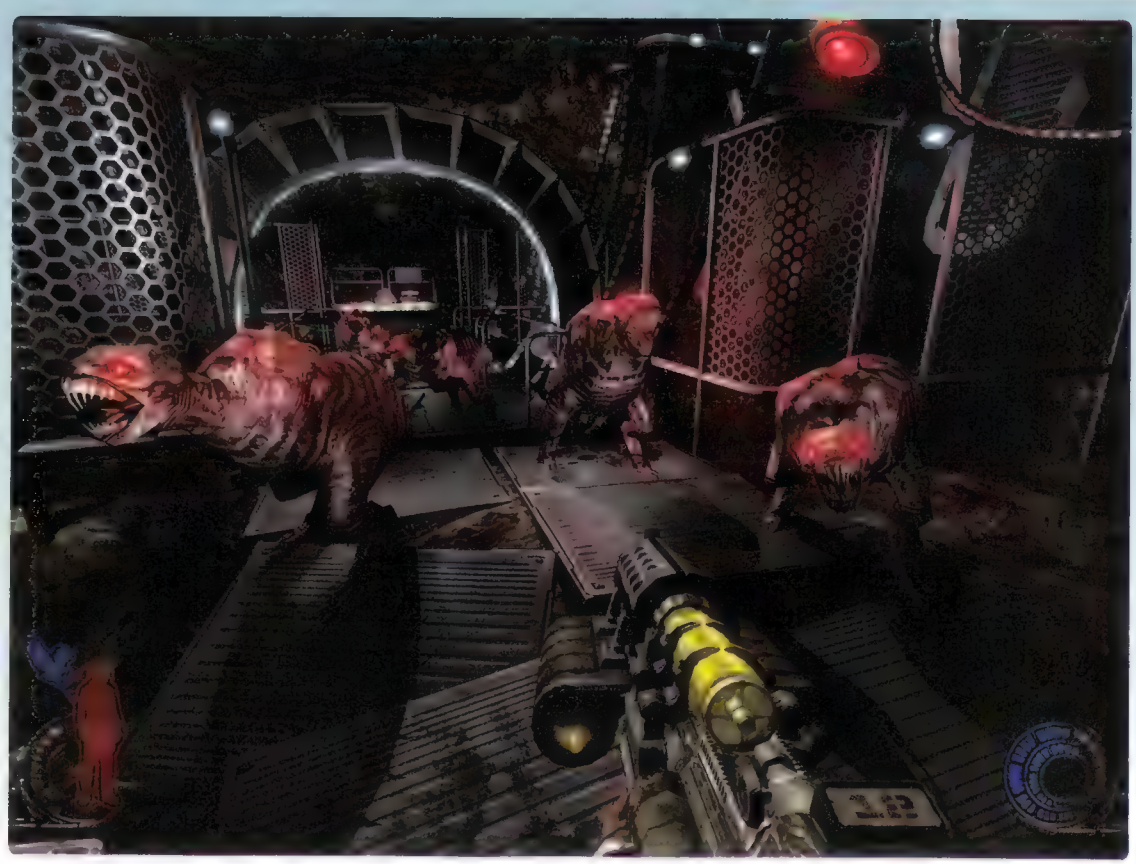


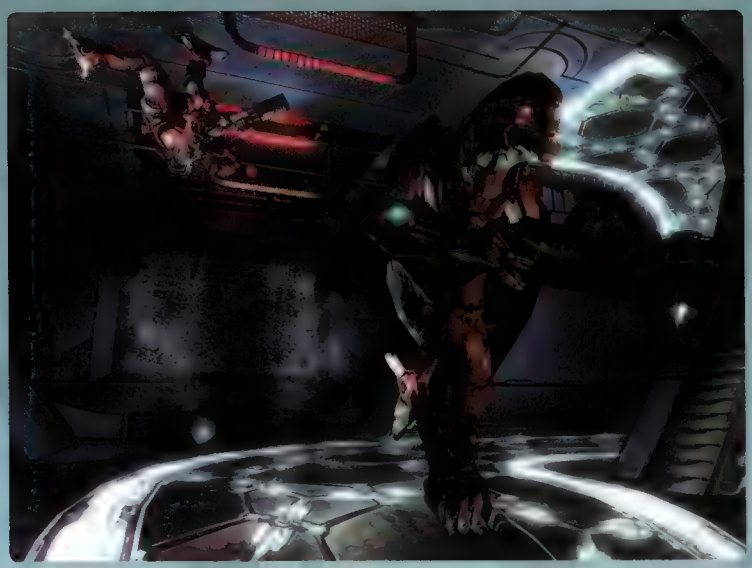
"Most creatures are eventually assimilated by the sphere, working in a symbiotic relationship."

place in which Tommy has been imprisoned, known as a Dyson Sphere—so massive that a sun burns in its core. It's a biological entity, a mixture of the organic and inorganic, its metallic corridors intertwined with living matter. Most creatures are eventually assimilated by the sphere, working in a symbiotic relationship. In one of the most compelling areas I saw, human drones, stripped of their clothes and former selves, toiled away in an intricate laboratory. They'll pay no attention to your presence if unprovoked.

Indiscriminate toward its victim, the sphere harvests technology as well. In one particular cargo hold, containing an asteroid and lined with spindle clusters for collecting energy, a jumbo jet lies in ruin, along with other gigantic objects from the planet below. You can see Earth from afar, eerily reminding you of your entrapment in the depths of space. The aliens are quite interested in pretty much everything on Earth's surface, including arcade machines, which you'll find, playable, throughout the sphere in the most random places. There's even a room humorously beaming in radio transmissions from the planet's surface.

"We recently sent our sound director, Ed Lima, out to the Nevada desert to record some dialogue with the infamous talk-show host Art Bell," recalls Rhinehart. "In Prey, the alien sphere is in orbit around Earth—so the aliens are able to pick up Earth radio





transmissions. The player will encounter a number of places where they can hear what's happening back on Earth via people calling into Art's show."

When you're not listening to freaky radio shows for a break in the action, other quieter moments come into play, such as Tommy's vision quests involving the spirit of his deceased Grandfather. In this land of the ancients, a network of caves that nicely mix up the visual variety, Tommy receives advice and powers and, while reluctant to listen, a spiritual lesson. "There's an interesting conflict with his Grandfather, who wants him to train and learn more about his heritage before he tries to take on the aliens," explains Gerritsen. "When he's here, time doesn't pass in the physical world. But still he's impatient, he just doesn't want to take the time; he wants to find his girlfriend and get off the sphere."

In yet another alternate realm of existence, Tommy will fall into the Death Walk if his injuries become too severe in the real world. Here, you must attack enough spirits to replenish your life force and return to the living. Dying doesn't really exist in Prey. "We're kind of sick of the whole save-crawl mentality," says Gerritsen. "We just wanted to get rid of the whole dying thing. It totally takes you out of the immersion of the game."

It's not Human Head's intentions to beat you over the head with difficulty. "One of the guys here had a really good analogy for it. A lot of times it's like the designer against the gameplayer, the designer kind of smacking the player down," begins Rhinehart. "His analogy was that the designer should be the benevolent babysitter. If the player gets hurt, if there's a tough situation, the designer's there to help you out. We try to put health in intelligent places, place ammo where it really makes sense and will help you out when you truly need it. But the DDA [dynamic difficulty adjustment] system is meant to watch what the player's doing. If you're doing poorly, it'll go easier on you, if you're doing well, it'll make it a little bit harder. And we're also implementing a system where if you defeat the game once, it'll unlock wicked mode."

Human Head's aiming to make more than just another first-person shooter, but of course, you still have to stick to one convention: the vehicle. Here you get a fully maneuverable shuttle to pilot, which comes equipped with plenty of firepower and a tractor beam that picks things up and tosses them around like empty milk cartons. "It's a cool break from the ground run-and-gun," says Rhinehart. "Certain enemies, especially the Hunters, can use the shuttles, so they'll run up and try and you might be in an aerial battle. Some creatures are easier to kill, some aren't in the shuttles."

There's one sequence where the free roaming flight transitions to a restricted passage up a towering tube, which tilts up into a breathtaking view of the sphere and the exterior of space. The power of the Doom 3 engine is certainly being put to marvelous use: the game is absolutely incredible to look at, packed with all kinds of scintillating effects, moody shadows, detailed shading and giant chunks of all sorts of fascinating anachronistic technology. Human Head may still be keeping a tight lid on their design process—they love to answer with "that's all I'm gonna say..."—but the peak I've gotten so far would make any first-person shooter fan wide-eyed with anticipation.

Prey

PC, Xbox 360

Preview

Point of Interest

The developers joked about actually allowing you to shuttle to Earth, taking a three hour flight to victory.

Developer: Human Head **Publisher:** 2K Games

Available: 2006

"We just wanted to get rid of the whole dying thing. It totally takes you out of the immersion of the game." - Tim Garrison

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PlayStation 2

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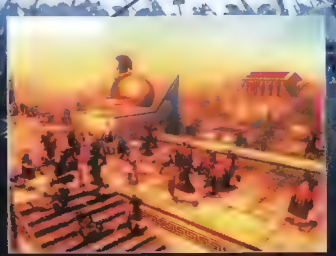
the CREATIVE ASSEMBLY



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Tomb Raider
L E G E N D

More than a leap of faith

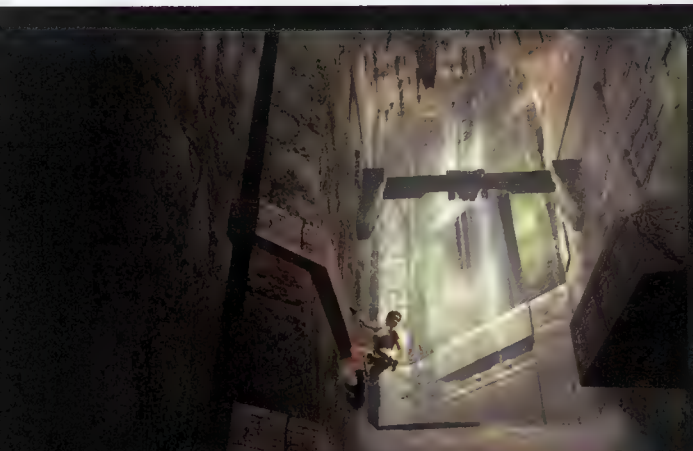
I [illegible] Lara Croft. She had soared through a series of well-received games for consoles such as the PlayStation, Dreamcast, and PlayStation 2. Her adventures inspired Hollywood to make a Tomb Raider movie, and all seemed golden. Until, as things have a habit of doing, things went south in a decidedly unsettling hurry.

Croft's second movie did a passable Titanic impersonation, and not in terms of box office draw. Her last game adventure Tomb Raider: Angel of Darkness did so very well, it inspired Eidos to pull the golden goose franchise from its original developers Core and give it to the Menlo Park, Ca.-based Crystal Dynamics.

Dynamics' task was simple: re-forge a Legend. With Croft's original designer, Toby Gard, in tow, the company seems to be on its way to doing just that.

Gone is Lara Croft the plastic love doll with the huge gazoombs. In her place is a slimmer, more athletic, more realistic Lara. She's a more adept adventurer now, able to make [illegible] don't go perfectly and do simple things like hurriedly stop and reverse directions when she approaches ledges. "She'll save you from simple mistakes," the game's producer Morgan Gray says. When leaping, the heroine gives visual cues as to where she'll head next, her body shifts to the left or right for horizontal jumps and compact and tenses for vertical hops.

Eidos remains weary of letting anyone outside of Crystal Dynamics test Tomb Raider: Legend's combat. "Combat is getting a lot of love," Gray states and, later, "[Croft] has two guns for a reason." Brief gameplay scenes showed Croft nimbly hopping across a battlefield, using her combat lock to fix upon no-goodniks and then blasting away. This new Croft [illegible]



It's easy to see why Crystal-D have become known for their awe-inspiring environments.

will also be afforded various "targets of opportunity," during fights—things such as barrels that can be shot by pressing a selected gameplay button. Close-up, she'll be able to use her foes as springboards, pistol-whip them, or perform other melee strikes.

It was possible to go hands-on for some tomb raiding, however, and here it seems Legends has its heart in the right place. As Croft approached a series of platforms across a chasm, the ground began to shake and disaster loomed. A series of prompts offered an escape route; Croft had to jump onto a collapsing tower, then make a quick leap to safety before it fell into oblivion, and ultimately needed to quickly grab a ledge to safety. The event played out like a Quicktime event from the Dreamcast adventure Shenmue: match the correct sequence or die trying.

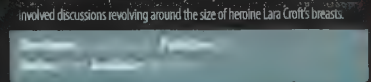
A series of huge stone spheres required liberation and then maneuvering into various depressions to open up a new pathway. Croft's new magnetic grapple gun proved useful in freeing one ball from an overhead perch; an offending stone was yanked to the ground and, with it, a sphere. Simple jumps highlighting Croft's new awareness of her surroundings made it possible to free the other targets. And this time, there was no convoluted solution to the puzzle, a problem increasingly more common in later iterations of the Tomb Raider series. "We want to get back to puzzles that aren't contrived," Gray says simply.

There's more to be had, but Eidos is wary of revealing too much. Yes, there will be vehicles in the game, but no one is saying what they'll be. Yes, the plot revolves around Croft investigating her past, but no, no one's going to spoil that surprise. All Gard will leave players with is a cryptic hint of things to come: "We want to know what makes her so driven," he says. "What makes her so violent."

Greg Orlando

Point of Interest

Eidos and the development team at Crystal Dynamics have had many deep and involved discussions revolving around the size of heroine Lara Croft's breasts.



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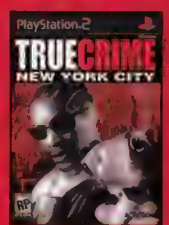

True Crime
New York City
PS2, XBox

Ultimate Spider-Man
PS2, XBox, NGC

MAKE ONE HOLIDAY STOP

The Warriors
PS2, XBox

X-Men Legends II
Rise Of Apocalypse
PS2, XBox, NGC

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Dead or Alive 4

New fighters, new moves, new visuals, same bounce

"Fighters take on a more tangible effect in combat, making old moves seem painfully new."

Team Ninja head honcho Tomonobu Itagaki has no issues going on record to proclaim his Dead or Alive series the king of 3D fighters. The always outspoken game designer has some heavy ammunition to back his claim with his latest, Dead or Alive 4.

Argue if you want that the top of the competition offer more sophistication to appease the hardest of the hardcore, but no way can you point to any 3D fighter that looks anywhere near as striking as this Xbox 360 sequel. There's the obvious gift of this next-generation of hardware opening up new avenues of detail for Team Ninja, and then there's the raw craft behind it all; as familiar as Dead or Alive 4 can be on first play, you start to appreciate the game in a new light the deeper you go.

While you can't deny a pervasive recycling to the game that will turn the noses of the less informed, it's the finer details to the new engine that finally count. Fighters take on a more tangible effect in combat, making old moves seem painfully new. Animations lend more grace and precision of motion. The wide-screen presentation and more naturalistic visual effects aid in a greater illusion of a virtual space; I found my attention in tune to the looming architecture around my fighter as much as to the confined space in front of my opponent.

From the initial announcement of DOA4's planned arrival on Xbox 360, Itagaki has insisted you'll be playing much more than what is essentially a visually juiced Dead or Alive Ultimate. Validation will come after more of the game is uncovered, but once most DOA disciples get a look at the game in action, there probably won't be much complaining regardless. Brady Fiechter

Dead or Alive 4

Xbox 360

Point of Interest

When playing online, the lobby, offering a casual environment like a game room and virtual fight screens.

Developer: Team Ninja **Publisher:** Tecmo
Online: 2-player **Available:** November

Ryu shows his appreciation for the art of fighting

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Prince of Persia
The Two Thrones

Hail to the almost king, baby. The prince has returned to his beloved Babylon, only to find it a smoldering wreck. "My only welcome was fire and arrows," he muses mournfully in the game's opening cinema.

The Two Thrones stands as the third game in the Ubisoft-produced Prince of Persia series and sticks closely to the tried-and-true platforming aspects of its predecessors. Once again, he who would be king finds himself in a world of perilous drops, narrow ledges, overhanging beams, poles, banners, perches, balconies, and pressure plates, all of which must be navigated to get from A to B. To beat a looming evil, the prince must leap and climb, balance and perch, swing and slide—and then tie all the moves together for maximum gain with minimum pain.

In motion, Thrones reveals just how far the prince as both a hero and a game series has come. The platforming elements, although unnaturally pervasive, are rendered seamlessly. Playing the game, there's a real sense that Ubisoft has got this extended jumping puzzle

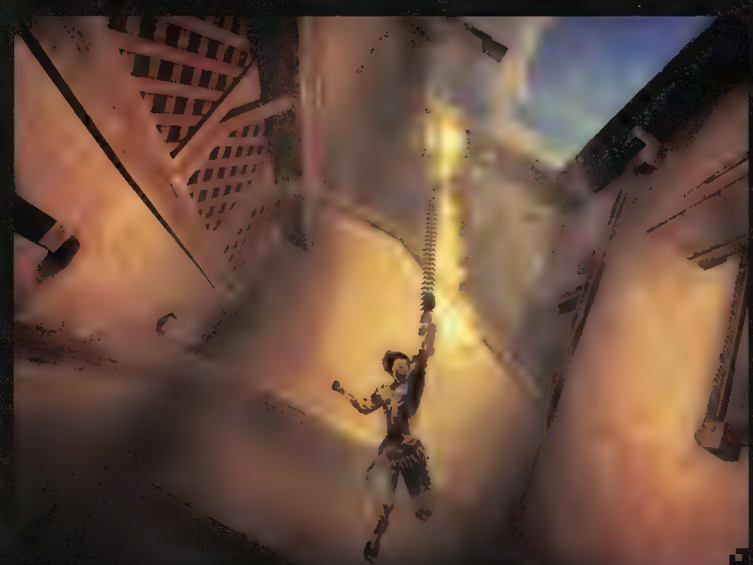
thing down pat. There's always a natural progression to the jumping puzzles, a strange sort of logic by which platforms give way to overhangs which lead to balconies that can be shimmied across before a leap across a chasm to the safety of an unguarded antechamber. It always feels strange to be doing so much jumping, balancing, planning, and dashing for safety, but it never seems wrong. And that's Ubisoft's great triumph—the creation of a playground that's at once challenging without ever deteriorating into being a challenge in the negative sense of the word.

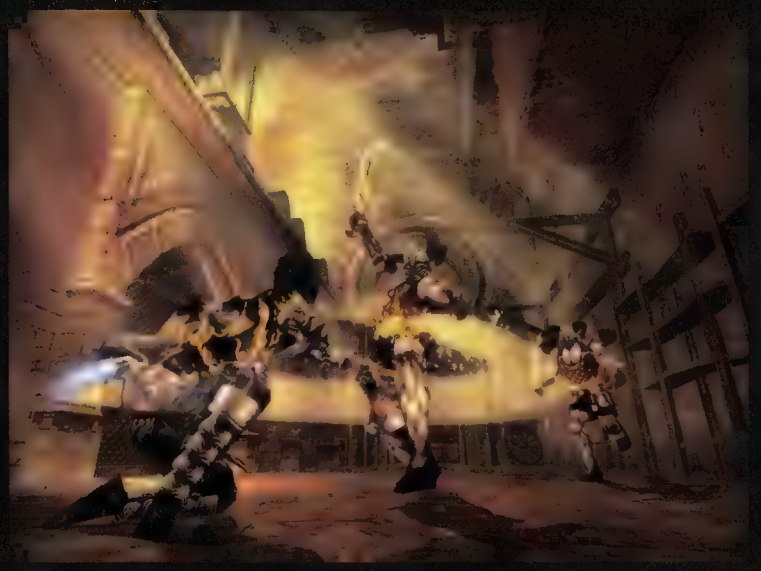
It all comes together when the prince meets the playground. Ubisoft has imbued its hero with a series of smooth animations and a sort of situational awareness that's a godsend when it comes to hitting the tough jumps. The prince will reach for ledges and lean his body into jumps—the sort of lifesaving techniques a real human might employ if he was foolhardy enough to attempt to run across a wall before hopping onto a platform aligned diagonally from his current position.

Now an outcast in his own kingdom, the prince finds himself exposed to the newly freed sands of time—the source of his temporal-altering abilities. The sands are a cruel mistress and the prince finds himself changing until he finally emerges with a second personality. Players will be able to control both the prince and his dark self, and each will have access to different attacks. The Dark Prince can strangle his opposition with a whiplike weapon known as the Daggertail. The prince can use two weapons at once, and toss one at foes. Both can sneak up behind enemies and, when the game screen warps slightly, perform deadly disembowelments or beheadings called "speed kills." Time manipulation continues to play an integral part in the proceedings, with both princes

"In motion, Thrones reveals just how far the prince as both a hero and a game series has come."

The whiplike Daggertail is used to strangle opponents about the neck until they die.





There's just no talking to the prince anymore.

"The sands are a cruel mistress and the prince finds himself changing until he finally emerges with a second personality."

able to reverse their mistakes, slow down the game's action, and more.

It's only fitting, of course. Time has always been generous to the prince, and the prince has returned the favor by not only aging gracefully, but also improving as his body of work gets bigger; his third outing, all hyperbole aside, may well prove to be his best. An extended chariot race sequence—summoning up images of the Xbox' Circus Maximus, only not endowed with suckiness—pits the prince against a series of wheeled carts in a pounding, furious dash through a series of city streets. A well-done boss fight pits the prince against a jawless giant in a rather unnerving thong; the goal here is to take out the giant's eyes while avoiding his nemesis' grasp.

The coronation has been set for December. And his royal majesty's subjects should be well pleased with the results. Greg Orlando

Point of Interest

The subtitle refers to a new character in the Prince mythos or, rather, an old character with two minds as to the singular subject of a second personality.

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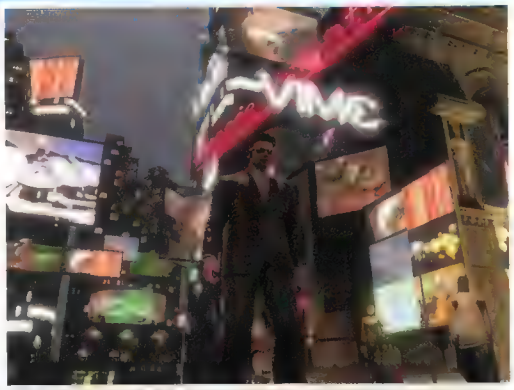
perfectdarkzero.com
XBOX 360

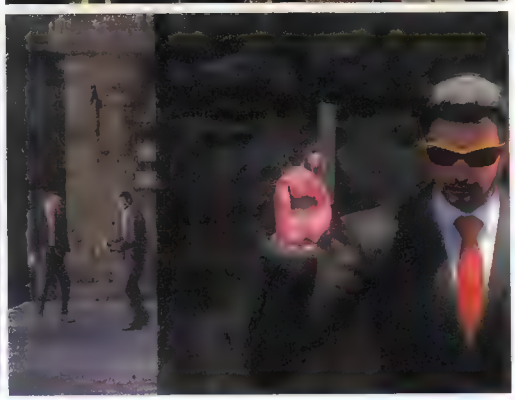
Frame City

Xbox 360

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco **Available:** TBA

Your name is Crow, and you kill people for a living. The latest assignment takes you into a futuristic East Asian slum known as Frame City, where a drug kingpin must be hunted down for the kill. Fortunately, he has a lot of henchmen, which you will methodically kill by a number of techniques that come down to your personal taste and the situation at hand. Weapons are varied and violent. You'll actually get to hunt your prey at times, choosing when and where they receive your services. **Brady Fiechter**





Samurai Champloo

PlayStation 2

Developer: Bandai **Publisher:** Bandai **Available:** Q1 2006

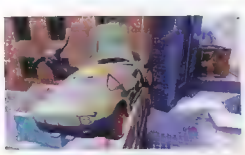
If ever an anime deserved the game treatment, it was…Cowboy Bebop. Sadly it didn't bop so well to the extent that Bandai didn't dare even export it. Enter the next big thing in Tarantino-esque anime—dripping with enough style and grooviness to lure in any mortal—and sure enough, opportunity is again pounding on Bandai's door. Will they slam it shut yet again or make us proud? All we know so far is that the Champloo game is based on original events, voiced by the original cast, and is hack 'n slash with some music elements fused into the swordplay. Enough to get us very excited…again. **Dave Halverson**

Crackdown

Xbox 360

Developer: Real Time Worlds **Publisher:** Microsoft **Available:** TBA

If you're playing Crackdown and get a bit of a GTA-vibe going on, don't be surprised: it's being developed by Andy Jones, who was the original creator of the multi-million-selling franchise. This time he and his team are focusing on an open city that expands upwards as much as outwards, where you take the violent chance pretty much anywhere you want as you leave a path of destruction. Playing a juiced-up superhuman cop, your powers will increase along the way, enabling feats like towering jumps and wild speeds. **Brady Fiechter**

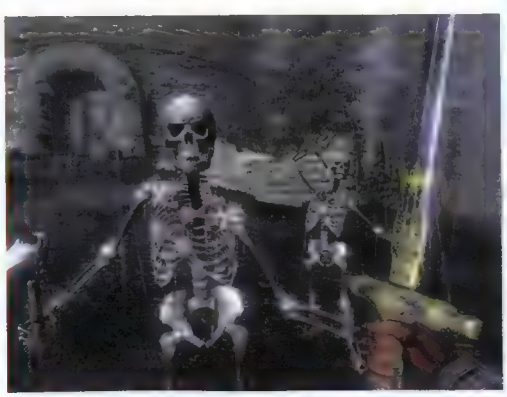


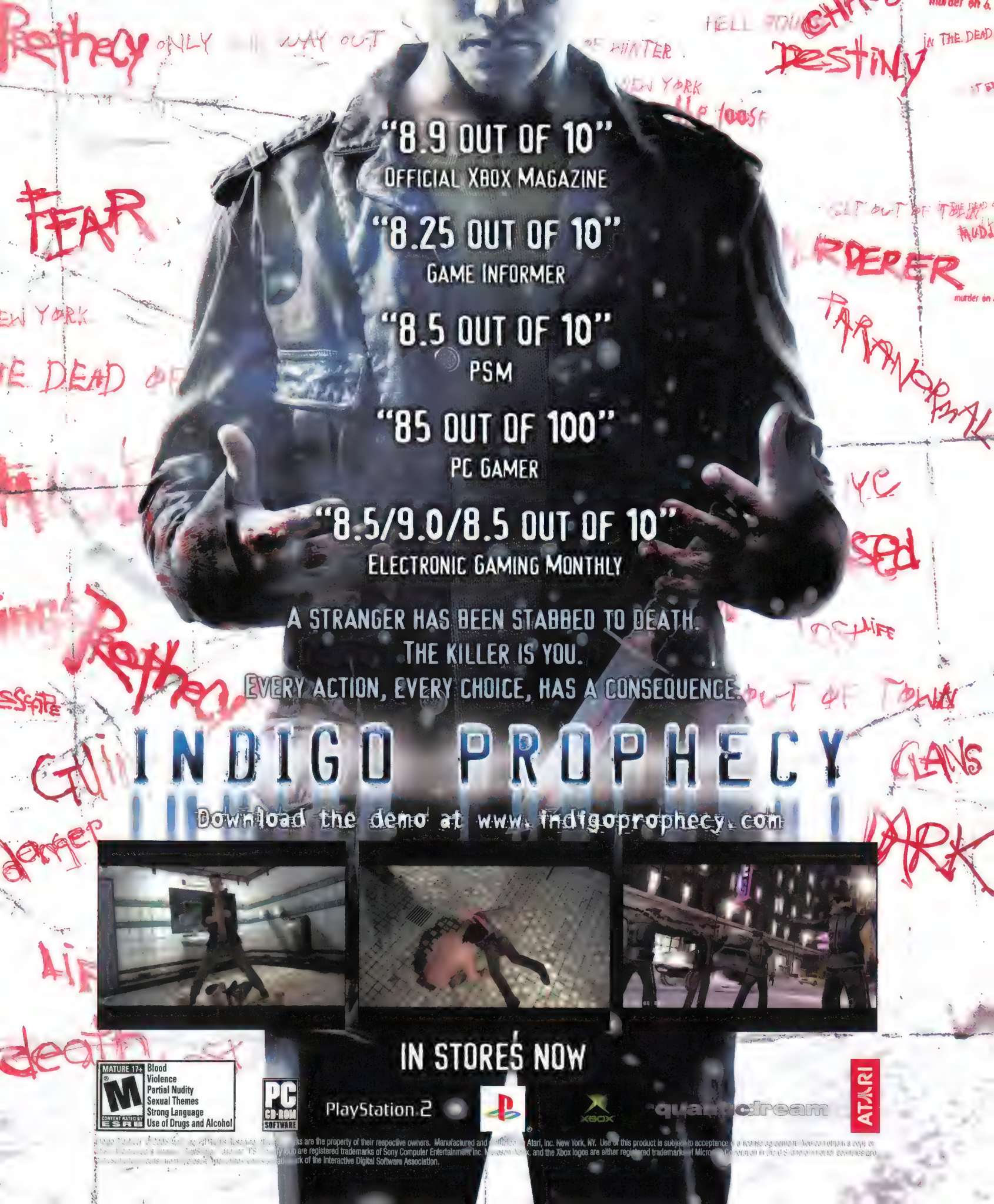
The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion

Xbox 360, PC

Developer: Bethesda **Publisher:** 2K Games **Available:** Q4

A giant sequel to the Xbox's Morrowind, The Elder Scrolls IV: Oblivion is an entirely different monster. And this time, it looks incredible, showing us a role-playing universe right off the bat that looks like nothing else before it. The hero of the game is yours to create, as you set off across a massive landscape that's wide open for tailored exploration. Characters you interact with actually set off on their own tasks, interacting in the world independently of your direct actions. This one's a pleasant surprise. **Brady Fiechter**





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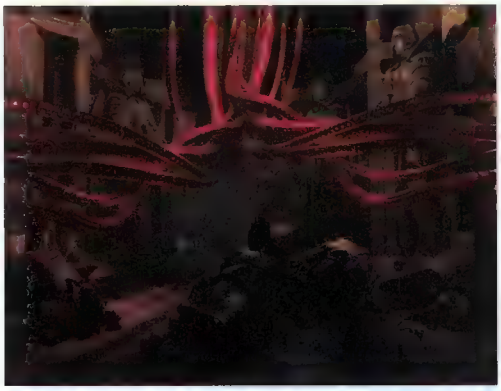
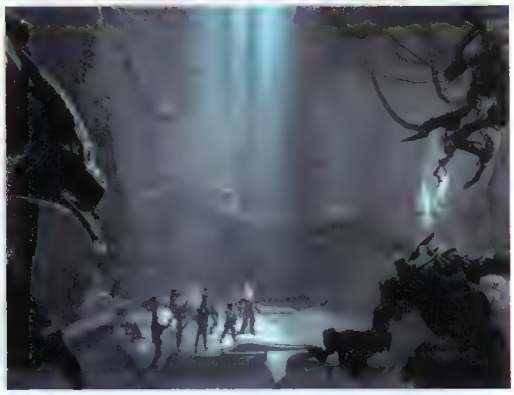
Too Human

Xbox 360

Developer: Silicon Knights **Publisher:** Microsoft **Available:** ?????

Developed by the talent behind Eternal Darkness, Too Human follows a character who's striving to be more machine than man. The game is heavily action-oriented but billed to be going in nontraditional directions with its mechanics. An extremely ambitious story is also in the works, planned to unfold through three chapters on the Xbox 360. A very cinematic presentation's a big part of the experience, with a focus on unprecedented animation routines and camera work aimed to reflect the dynamics of film. **Brady Fiechter**





Battlestations: Midway

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: SCI Games **Publisher:** Eidos **Available:** 2006

Battlestations: Midway begins with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and follows the events of the Pacific naval war between the United States and Japan. Players will get to control a host of World War II ships and planes such as destroyers, submarines, carriers, and dive- and long-range bombers as they fight across the Philippines, Java, the Coral Sea, and Midway. It's possible to switch between forces at will, so armchair generals will need to use all their wits and management skills to control fleets, fend off enemy planes, launch planes from their own bases and carriers, drop torpedoes, dogfight enemy planes, and go on bombing runs against enemy ships and airfields. **Greg Orlando**

TOCA Race Driver 3

PlayStation 2, Xbox

Developer: Codemasters **Publisher:** Codemasters **Available:** February 2006

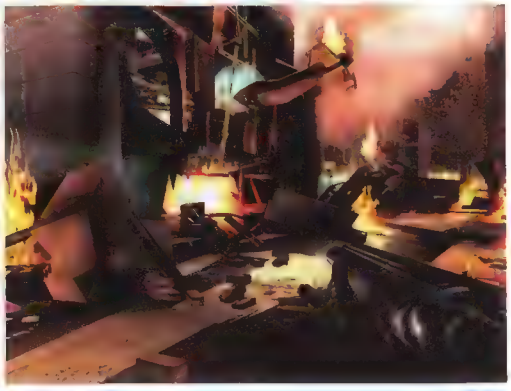
As far as multifaceted simulation racers go—which is very far; they're among the top-selling games each year—you'd be hard pressed to find anything even close to TOCA Race Driver 3. Not only does this insanely accurate racing experience cover every type of racing you can imagine from Open Wheel Euro Karting to Touring Supertrucks, each and every leg of the world tour is paved in perfection to the minutest handling characteristic. The Pro Career, which spans Classics, GT, Oval, Touring, Off-Road, and Open Wheel is the best there is and it's multiplayer-, system link- and Xbox Live-enabled. **Dave Halverson**

Zero Tolerance

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Rocksteady **Publisher:** Eidos **Available:** 2006

The Miranda Rights applied to arrested criminals should be modified for the first-person shooter Zero Tolerance. To wit: You have the right to be shot dead. You have the right to take hostages, but you will nonetheless be shot dead. You have the right to be burned by Molotov Cocktails, to show off your ragdoll physics powered by Half-Life 2's powerful Havoc 3 engine by falling from great heights when sniped, and be horribly disfigured by the T-Zero unit police wielding power tools. If you choose to wave these rights, you will be shot dead anyway, by crime-intolerant supercops who can wield such amazing tools as a deformable and bulletproof riot shield. And have a nice day—before you are shot. Repeatedly. **Greg Orlando**



You are Kameo. Morph into 10 different formidable elemental warriors at will. Explore enchanted lands. Then crush, clobber, char, freeze, elude, ensnare, and destroy the evil boss Thorn and his minions. Only you have the power to restore peace to the kingdom. Make that, several powers... Kameo.com

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Jump in.

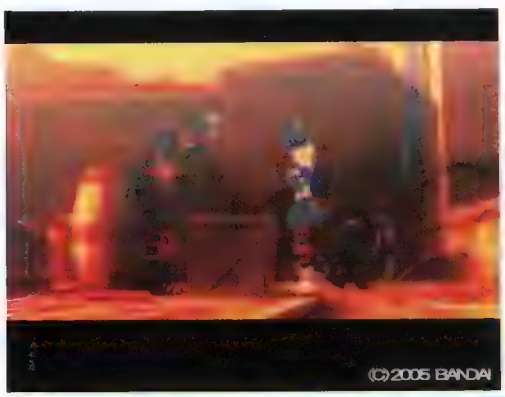
XBOX 360

.hack//GU

PlayStation 2

Developer: Bandai **Publisher:** Bandai **Available:** TBA 2006

.hack//GU is about to reach new, never before imagined heights. On top of looking much more sinister (the system managers no longer have control over events) it is set in 2017 AD, where "The World" population has reached 12-million. GU will follow the story and growth of 8 players (Haseo, Atoli, Ovan, Kuhn, Endrance, Pai, Sakbo, and Yata) through both the actual (Reality) and game (The World) worlds, as they confront roaming PKs and disputes between countless guilds along with events and phenomena that shouldn't exist. **Dave Halverson**



Rogue Trooper

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Rebellion **Publisher:** Eidos **Available:** Spring 2006

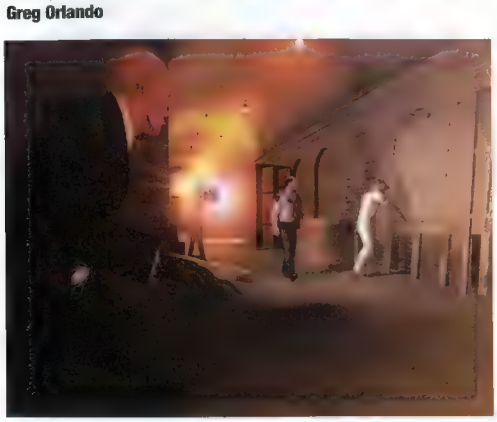
The blue-skinned Rogue Trooper, star of a British comic book and now a third-person shooter, carries his dead comrades with him—and not in his heart. As the Trooper storms the war-torn Nu Earth, he'll be able to access his friends Helm, Gunnar, and Bagman as part of his equipment, with their memory chips implanted in a mobile gun, backpack, and helmet. These chips allow the Trooper to create his own ammunition, for example, or place the gun and leave it to shoot up enemies. Otherwise fairly standard in its approach, Trooper did feature some nice vehicle-based mayhem such as a frantic shooting/chase sequence involving a futuristic helicopter. **Greg Orlando**

Hitman: Blood Money

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: IO Interactive **Publisher:** Eidos **Available:** Spring 2006

Follow the money, and it leads to the cold-blooded killer Agent 47. In 47's latest adventure, the assassin expands his deadly repertoire with customizable weaponry that can increase a gun's firepower or decrease its chance to be found during a frisk. Forty-seven can also push people down stairs, or huck them over balconies, providing a neat opportunity for the game's picture-in-picture feature to show the victim plunging to a gory doom. This time, a new notoriety system has been added, and if the hitman's evil deeds are witnessed, it will cause a panic that may extend to future missions. Bribes can silence witnesses, but the newspaper generated at the end of each mission never lies. **Greg Orlando**



Mass Effect

Xbox 360

Developer: BioWare **Publisher:** Microsoft **Available:** TBA

BioWare demonstrated their immense skills in the role-playing genre with Knights of the Old Republic, did it again with the more action-oriented Jade Empire, and now they're taking the culmination of their experience into a massively ambitious sci-fi trilogy with Mass Effect. As you'd expect, the game will feature an exhaustive character growth system, and will provide you with several paths of personal discovery as you experience the more passive moments of the futuristic tale. **Brady Fiechter**

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TRAP

PlayStation 2

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[eM]-eNCHANTarM-

Xbox 360

Developer: From Software **Publisher:** From Software **Available:** TBA

Developed by the internal From Software team responsible for Otogi (this is good), the bizarrely phrased [eM]-eNCHANTarM- is a more traditional role-playing game, where extensive conversations with inhabitants divulge clues to your progression and battles take place in turn-based scenarios across an enclosed grid. You've got your stats and rotating party members and character growth, healing spells and short- and long-range attacks that all revolve around an EP system. Interestingly, the game may span as many as three discs to hold its huge amount of next-gen data—a complaint the team has expressed. **Brady Fiechter**

Commandos: Strike Force

PlayStation 2, Xbox, PC

Developer: Pyro Studios **Publisher:** Eidos **Available:** Spring 2006

Formerly, the Commando series played out as real-time simulations, but now are storming across World War II-era Europe in a first-person shooter. Commandos come in three flavors: green beret, spy, and sniper, with some missions requiring switching back and forth between two player-controlled soliders. Each class, of course, varies in certain aspects—spies can take downed enemies' clothing, snipers can hold their breath to perform long-distance kills, and green berets pack heavy weaponry. Missions require players to devise their own strategies to accomplish multiple goals within a given area; tanks must be blown up, bridges held against Nazi invaders, comrades rescued, and mortar scouts shot dead before they can sight targets. **Greg Orlando**

Tales of Legendia

PlayStation 2

Developer: Namco Limited **Publisher:** Namco Hometek Inc. **Available:** Feb 2006

To what dowe owe this last minute glut of amazing PS2 RPGs I do not know, but here is yet another that like so many before it deserves your full attention. Tales of Legendia is a gorgeous game adorned with anime cinematics from renowned artist Kazuto Najazawa (acclaimed for the animation sequences in Kill Bill Vol. 1) and Namco's new X-LiMBS Battle System, designed by the Soul Calibur team to feel like a fighting game! From what we've played, Legendia may be the best RPG Namco has ever produced: A bold statement to be sure but just wait until you see it in action. It's safe to say that if you choose to wait for PS3 you will be VERY busy and VERY happy throughout Q1 and 2 2006 with your PS2. **Dave Halverson**

Chrome Hounds

Xbox 360

Developer: From Software **Publisher:** Sega **Available:** TBA

The Armored Core guys are at it again… or at least, they're dabbling with rumbling mechs again, calling the result Chrome Hounds. The game takes place in the near future, where war is raging on the ground utilizing these heavily-armed mechanical goliaths. You take control as a tactical commander, belting out commands to allied units as you lead the charge. Thousands of options are available to tinker with your war machine in pretty much any manner you can think of, leading the creation online for cooperative and all-out head-to-head onslaughts. **Brady Fiechter**

THE EXCITING SEQUEL TO *SERVANT OF THE SHARD*—AVAILABLE OCT. 2005

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Collision Decision

People can't stand in mid-air so why should your video game character?

Words Dave Halverson

With "next-gen" gaming once again occupying the hearts, minds and hands of millions of people worldwide, I thought I'd further probe the elusive subject of dynamic collision, my pet peeve that's grown into a massive headache by enlisting the help of one of the masters of character creation and physics, David Sirani, creator of Aero the Acrobat, producer, co-creator, and lead designer of the original Dave Perry and Shiny developed game for the Sega Genesis, and the first action platformer to launch a successful character within a Japanese-based franchise, with Blazing Dragons at Capcom Digital Studios.

So Dave, you and I share much common ground when it comes to what we believe makes a great game, beginning with a great character that feels great. Yet so many developers seem to miss this, thus blowing the single most important element of the game. To what do you attribute this nonsensical fact? Where does the breakdown occur?
Unfortunately, this has been one of the many drawbacks with US studios in terms of development. The rap against US developers in particular has been the "attention to detail" aspect that allows too much left to chance, or that it is "not important enough" to worry about. This is where the Japanese excel and European developers are not far behind them. The US development community has generally been labeled as "lazy."

What of matching a character's feet to the slopes of the game, whereas when he, she, or it comes to a rest on a slope and the toes melt in and the heels float up or worse the character floats...Is it very difficult to match the feet? I've noticed it done even on characters with tiny legs...Take Vexx...he's a little guy but he's always properly affixed to the ground...as was Link in Wind Waker (strange that Sonic doesn't follow suit). Nothing jars me out of a game more than the sad sight of floating heels or a character's feet dug into surfaces.
It is all about priorities and sweating the smallest details when coding and animating these functions and assigning collision detection or animation priorities based on where the feet are and how they should function or react to that piece of geometry. To some, it may either be a non-important issue, or development timeframe issue where when they are behind schedule, something has to give. The important thing is to have an organized and systematic development cycle that begins with a well-engineered design planning document.
As far as the feet goes, it is a question of whether the polygonal model has "joints" in the feet where the leg ends. Without a skeletal joint there in both feet, the artist cannot animate the feet for situations such as slanted slopes. Without that the only other way to accomplish that task is to build a model specifically for that function, and that won't happen since it is not very cost-effective.

> "Great product vision along with thorough design and planning and harmony of all efforts in the team will result in a great game."

What about stairs...How difficult is it to employ separate animation for negotiating stairs? Take the new Matrix: Path of Neo game for instance. Here's a

MK Shaolin Monk's characters weren't dynamic to slopes but enjoyed control and a connection with the environment that is second to none.

Primal's Jen matched every step of the game and had separate animations for stairs and any variations on the terrain.

An example of a flat plane on a sloped surface.

high-tech high-dollar game yet Neo runs as if suspended by cables down and up stairs and should he stop he floats. How does a company like Shiny miss this?
This same joint in the polygonal model foot (as mentioned earlier) would facilitate the possibility of leaning the character into the radius of a running turn, in order to realistically portray a smooth transition when running around a bend in the pathway or even clever stair climbing. These elements are not hard, they just need to be planned and implemented as part of the development cycle. If it isn't built this way then it can't be coded and therefore will be missing in action.
The scope of a product and the enormous amount of content that is needed to be built can often be a determining factor. While it is unfortunate when these issues do not appear to be intuitively planned or implemented, these are decisions made by the production department so that a tight timeframe or behind schedule dilemma can be met. Sometimes, there is just no time to fix these issues at all and still meet the ship date, so a decision is made that this does not affect gameplay and it stays as is.

What about other types of collision miscues...Like say hitting walls or trees? In Maximo I remember the first thing I did was run up to the first big tree and swing my sword at it. Not only did it connect but it stuck in and Maximo pried it out. I knew right there I was in the presence of greatness. It meant so much...so how long did that take? Was it so hard? Or is it merely good planning before hand that makes such things feasible?
It is always about planning and covering all of the details that might become issues. It isn't hard if you want to truly impress an initial player and you want to pleasantly surprise them when they attempt to execute any interactive element of your game. The best games are the ones where the developers think of everything. Even though Maximo was developed in the US, we wanted to be as good as a Capcom Japan game and I believe we succeeded at that. We planned accordingly and thoroughly and we developed carefully. We had a great and supremely talented team and I am proud of every one of them. A great game is the result of harmony during development. Great technology, great art, great production, great audio and it all begins with great visionary planning.

So in the end do you think these miscues are hardware limitations or simply shoddy planning? And depending on which, will it be so easy to integrate on next-gen that it will just go away or do you see these types of mistakes continuing?
Miscues are caused by sloppy planning combined with getting behind in the delivery of the product, and as a result features and details tend to slip by the wayside. The best 8-bit developers were the best 16-bit developers and so forth into the next generations. Great product vision along with thorough design and planning and harmony of all efforts in the team will result in a great game. A great development methodology comes with experience and the decisiveness to do everything correctly the first time.
New hardware just means a new stronger tool in which to create your vision of gameplay. It becomes just as important to cover every little thing that might be expected since players will think that a new, more powerful console makes it easier to develop on, which is not the case. Detail planning or engineering the design is what will deliver the greatest games.

I can't imagine a game with the Steven Spielberg or Peter Jackson name attached where the humans float on slopes and run up stairs without touching them... I wonder if these über-directors will pick up on such details. Sure will be interesting to see!
These Directors are noted for their attention to such things, so I would assume that they will cover these minute details in their own game efforts. However, movies are more linear and games are more immersive, so they will indeed have their work cut out for them! Ha! Have them call me and I will help their every effort!

What are you working on these days?
An unfortunate illness in the family pulled me out for awhile but I'm ready to jump back in either with a new publisher or find the backing to launch my own killer studio. I have a cracker-jack team waiting in the wings and enough original IP to keep us busy for years.

"It is all about priorities and sweating the smallest details when coding and animating these functions..."

Reviews

December 2005

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Dave Halverson
Editor in Chief

Dave critiques every game based on how well it hits its target audience, and has been practicing what he preaches in print for 13 years. He truly lives for his games. Within everything Dave writes, you will also find a little bit of his personal love of the art of gaming and game creation, the driving force in his life outside of music and actual human interaction.

Brady Fiechter
Executive Editor

Brady feels that when you've been playing video games since video games were invented, you tend to start to look past the unnecessary need to boil a game down to its mechanical parts and start to see the artistry and spirit of imagination that goes into its creation. It's never as simple as polygons and cool explosions.

Greg Orlando
Associate Editor

Of Greg Orlando, historians agree that he is, without question, the finest human being to be mentioned in this sentence. A veteran of the Cola Wars thrice decorated, Orlando understands the universe's great solitary truth: If the mule don't kick, you know the mule don't ride. He is currently missing, presumed pantsless...

Mike Griffin
PC Editor

Even as a wee lad playing Zaxxon on Coleco, the technology and artistry of game design has always fascinated Mike. He thinks some games are timeless in that respect, whether 2D, 3D, flat-shaded or bump mapped. Mike's goal is to equip the readers with accurate information, so that limited funds and time can be put to good use.

Ashley "Veela" Esqueda
Associate Editor

To Ashley, video games are like magnificent pieces of art: you don't break down the piece as a whole to comment on the brush stroke method or colors used. She thanks her mother for playing Castlevania II after school, and everyone in elementary school for shunning her, because without them, her obsession with gaming would not have been possible.

Michael Hobbs
Art Director

A gamer since Space Invaders, Michael has a soft spot for 2D shooters and other games that directly engage the player. Nintendo certainly ranks high on his list of favorite developers, and though recent forays into the world of MMORPGs have rather consumed him, he'll always have time for a game of Bangaio.

Rating System

Our scores represent both a game's technical merits and our personal opinions based on our expertise within each genre, of which the numbers alone do not necessarily tell the whole story. A perfect 10 represents a game that is flawless in the reviewer's opinion. Such a high standard means that 10s will be incredibly rare, but when it happens, it symbolizes that this game isn't just the very best—it's the best of the best.

10. Perfect
9. Extraordinary
8. Great
7. Good
6. Decent
5. Average
4. Below average
3. Poor
2. Bad
1. Terrible

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CONDEMNED:
Criminal Origins
Just keep telling yourself it's only a game

"Visually, Condemned will spoil you, as everything is exactly as it should be. Monolith has set the reality bar extremely high with its first 360 offering."

There's nothing quite like the anticipation and subsequent first few moments of a new console launch. It's like the male equivalent to giving birth…yanking that precious machine from its packaging—your main source of electronic entertainment for years to come. The shape, that first glance at the startup screen and feel of the controller…all indelible moments. Right about now, millions of men (and even some women) are experiencing this touchstone event, the pinnacle of which rests with that most precarious of game types: the launch title. Launch titles are the first sign of whether the preceding hype was well founded (see Sony PlayStation) or a load of crap (see Sega Saturn). If you arrive at this moment with any number of games you'll likely be a satisfied customer, but arrive with Kameo and/or Condemned and prepare to be blown away.

Billed as a real-time psychological thriller Condemned barely registered on my launch radar, thinking it would be either too heavy on forensics and light on action to engage me, or focus too much on the horror genre's overly worn and predictable devices. I barely grazed over our own cover story as to not spoil the surprise either way, so I really had no preconceived notions going in. Sometimes ignorance really is bliss. Within moments I was engaged, and within hours…amazed.

Condemned is actually an action game with forensic overtones (incredible forensic overtones that I want more of, badly) and a living breathing story that puts you at the center of a grizzly murder investigation amidst the best representation of real-world environments that you can possibly imagine. Visually, Condemned will spoil you, as everything is *exactly* as it should be. Monolith has set the reality bar extremely high with its first 360 offering. Fall through a floor and look up and you will see two layers of floorboards complete with a crawlspace in between, with each plank uniquely fractured…chairs, desks, tiles, lockers, trash, phones, appliances, plumbing, fences…you name it and it looks real enough to touch, or beat someone to death with. The interiors (my four of choice being an abandoned shopping mall, library, the bowels of the subway, and an abandoned school) are the very picture of realistic decay, and the lighting…let's just say that this is the generation that will change everything. As long as publishers stick to creating games for core users we are in for one helluva ride.

Set within a city on the brink of self-destruction, where birds are falling from the skies with brains reduced to sludge, the gameplay incorporates both real and supernatural implications, right down to the lead character, Ethan Thomas, whose only salvation lies in bringing one Serial Killer X to justice: A serial killer who kills serial killers using their own modus operandi, after using Ethan as bait to flush them out. Killing two fellow officers with Ethan's gun, he sets events in motion— a plunge into darkness where the only weapons are what Ethan can forage from his surroundings, along with his Taser and a lone voice on his cell phone—Rosa, his only connection to the outside world and the only person at the bureau who believes him innocent…lucky for him she's Chief of Forensics. Let the pain begin.

On the road to each ghastly corpse the name of the game is kill or be killed. The same disease that's turning birds' brains into mush has turned the dregs of the city into living, raging psychopaths that gravitate to the same dank locations where Ethan is conducting his investigation; and they're smart…maybe too smart. Should you happen upon a shotgun (and don't look for conveniently placed "ammo" boxes; when it's out, it's out) weaker enemies will scurry off at the sight of you and hide or burrow in to take you by surprise, and should the tables be turned, you'd be well advised to do same. Not to say that they are predictable or limited by any set pattern. There are many, many types of freaks and they all react differently. The only common thread is that they all want to kill you. You might have a foul living-dead girl scurry up to where you can almost touch her, only to shriek and scuttle away. Then minutes later hear her wheezing and chattering to herself waiting for you to happen by.

Your means of disposal: weapons vary from pipes, to rebar, conduit, 2x4s, locker doors…if you can swing it you can use it, and with each comes its real world precincts. A sledgehammer has a long radius and deals major damage but takes forever to swing, while a short pipe or conduit is fast and deals medium damage (I like that they accumulate blood, too). Blocking is also key (especially towards the end; master it, trust me), as is knowing when to run. Those who want to kill you will play with you. Condemned is scary. Not 'Doom' scary, but scary-scary. Piss in your pants scary. There are moments in here that will genuinely mess you up. I've never been so taken with a first-person game.

Condemned's other devices include exploration—searching for clues or weapons to overcome certain barriers, extremely clever puzzles, and of course those wonderful forensic tools which are best left for you to discover. It also bears mention that the dialogue is, for the most

He's not coming over to say hello.

part, superb.

And if you read anywhere that Condemned is linear—rip, crumble, wipe, and flush. The game does keep you on a linear path to an extent, because it needs to in order to drive the story and be a *game*. No, you can't go down the escalator and explore the entire mall...That would take a year to program and serve zero purpose. Any game that attempts to immerse you in a real-time cinematic story must be linear.

The only hitches I found were minor breaches in reality: when looking down in ankle-deep water I could still see Ethan's feet (but hey, at least he *has* feet, unlike a certain female bounty hunter I know, plus the water moved so beautifully I could give a shit) and although most items are given physics, certain things won't react to bashing. Also, selfishly, I wish the game were a bit longer, clocking in at around 11 hours. Normally I consider 10-15-hours ideal (outside of an RPG), but, in this case, I wanted more. The good news is that the end is anything but setting up the sequel perfectly and that this is a game you need to play through several times to truly appreciate. For starters, finishing using only melee weapons reaps a hefty reward, but beyond that I just wanna beat these freaks with a pipe some more.

Dave Halverson

Here's the guy that ate Leather Face.

Condemned **9.0** Score

Near perfect real-world visuals, lighting from the gods, wonderful acting, superb balance and pacing.

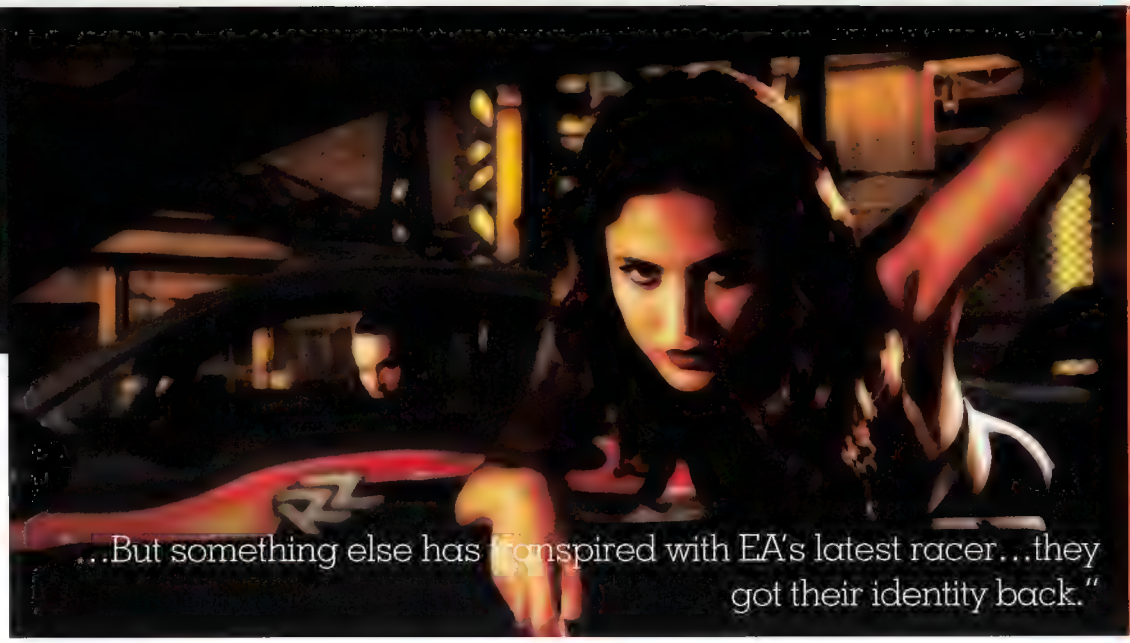
I'd like a jump and 3rd-person camera zoom is like The Chronicles of Riddick would have been tasty.

Developer: Monolith **Publisher:** Sega **Online:** None
Available: November

Better to be the igniter than the ignited.

NEED FOR SPEED MOST WANTED

Running with the devils



"...But something else has transpired with EA's latest racer...they got their identity back."

Before Need for Speed: Most Wanted came around, a new genre was already well on its way that I've gone ahead and branded the RRPG (Racing RPG). The only problem was that most of them were billboards for boardroom rap, hip-hop, and thug culture; recreations of the vilest elements of each genre—WASP-filtered aspects of this decade's version of Motown. Commercial rap and hip-hop has been pimped out by game publishers like no other cultural movement in history. But the fog may finally be lifting. As we enter an era where even the rappers seem to have had enough of their own bu-shit, this promising genre can finally find an audience for something other than exploitation; namely gameplay, and actual quality role-playing aspects. But something else has transpired with EA's latest racer...they got their identity back. Remember that amazing style and attitude that surfaced with Road Rash on 3DO; all their own and completely original? It's back. Most Wanted isn't a token MTV-RRPG, it's an original EA RRPG...and it's on Xbox 360; hallelujah. Having played all three launch racers I can safely say that for my money nothing even comes close. Ridge Racer and PGR look like cleaner, smoother versions of themselves but on 360 Most Wanted *lives*. EA have created an urban sprawl that you have to experience for yourself to truly appreciate.

And to think that this is a launch title...How much better can it get?

It looks great on Xbox and PS2, but on 360 it's otherworldly.

The name of the game is working your way up the Black List after a punk named Razer sabotages your car to win your pink and then uses it to race to the number one spot. Lucky for you, Mia, played by Josie Martin, plucks you from the curb, (the well-produced live-action cinemas use a monochrome-type effect; p-cool) takes you under her delicious wing and gets you back on your feet and on your way to reclaiming your car by picking off Black Listers one by one. But to do so you'll need to win various types of races, complete a variety of milestone challenges, and get your bounty and notoriety up by evading the police...one of the many incredible aspects of an overall stunning racing/chase package. EA get everything right but two things stand out as exceptionally outstanding: The GPS; which in free roam (the only way to play) will actually guide you to your safe-house, the shop, car dealer, whatever, and...no damage. Not having to pull into a shop and waste precious time and money every time you get a ding is just great game making. Realistic damage serves as little more than an annoyance in RRPGs. The focus should be on fun...spending your winnings on tuning and tricking out your car, and going kicky fast, and that's what Most Wanted is all about. To each aspect of the game there are nuances that keep it fresh for as long as you can play, and as you open up more of the overall city and get to know the streets, it's just too much damn fun. As far as the visuals go, this is a modified version of a last-gen game so there's certainly room for improvement. I'm sure that when EA builds a racer for the 360 from the ground up we'll see even more tricks, but for now, what I'm seeing is pretty much blowing my mind, so I can only imagine, but cannot complain. Driving through the alleyways and suburban sprawls...rain pouring down, thunder clapping, music up; this is (virtual) living. Dave Halverson

Need for Speed: Most Wanted 9.0

Xbox 360 (reviewed), Xbox, PS2, GC, PC

Score

A massive racing construct jam packed with awesome gameplay, gallons of music, a live action story and, on 360, oh-so-pretty graphics.

Ever so slight hitches in the frame rate, not so much bump or normal mapping.

Developer: EA **Publisher:** EA **Online:** Online play for Xbox & Xbox 360, PC **Available:** November

Ridge Racer 6

Very nice

No matter what happens, the Xbox 360 launch will be a success for me because I have an amazing new Ridge Racer to play on it. I'm a simple man you see, and can be entertained to the end of time by the Ridge Racer drift: see the corner, turn, lift, apply opposite lock, get back on the throttle and sail through the turn sideways. It just never gets old, and in the expert hands at Namco, it always feels exquisite.

Now on 360, we get a big dose of next gen sheen atop its classic core. It really does look nice, and true to the promise of new hardware, I was being shown some new things. There is an expansiveness in the view here that is beyond what we've seen in previous Ridge Racers. It's not just the native 16:9 aspect ratio contributing to this sensation, but also the various distances of the scenery around you. No longer constrained by having to hide distant parts of the courses by turns or other tricks, the designers have really taken advantage of this and created some often breathtaking views. The increased resolution of the 360 also allows for much finer detail than we're used to seeing, and this is especially evident when in some of the city courses. Sure you could nit-pick (flat crowds, slightly noticable aliasing), but to call it anything other than beautiful would earmark you as being jaded to the point of sadness.

Like the PSP game that came just before, Ridge Racer 6 continues the use of nitrous in the series, though it's gotten a little update. Basically, you can save up your nitrous to unleash a double or triple dose, each lasting longer and propelling you faster. As you play online, you'll find that balancing the use of these and finding the ideal parts of each track in which to use them will use plenty of your skill if you want to win.

I got exactly what I wanted out of this shiny new next-gen Ridge Racer. One could argue that something that doesn't surprise cannot be truly great. That might be true. Let's just call it very, very good and remind Namco that they'll need to surprise us next time. Michael Hobbs

"I'm a simple man you see, and can be entertained to the end of time by the Ridge Racer drift."

Ridge Racer 6	9.0
Xbox 360	Score

Classic drift mechanic, beautiful courses, expansive world tour mode, typically great Namco presentation

It feels like a giant version of the PSP game. Not really a bad thing, but certainly not original

Developer: Namco **Publisher:** Namco
Online: 8-player, CL, TA **Available:** November

Call of Duty 2

Even better than the awesome Call of Duty

Toward the end of the Russian campaign—the first of three main episodes, which gathers momentum in North Africa and culminates in a grippingly represented France—there's a sequence in Call of Duty 2 that starts at the base of a network of raised pipes, leading us through their rusty, winding passages above group after group of exposed, unsuspecting German soldiers. After a few clean shots are made undetected, the startled soldiers begin spraying machine-gun fire toward your position, ripping sunlight-streamed holes through the pipe as you scramble through the maze toward an exit point. It's an incredible sequence in a game filled with them, an exhilarating moment where you feel like a gamemaker has given you something new to play out.

There's a kick of adrenaline here, an engagement that goes beyond mechanical interaction and hits you in the gut. Call of Duty 2 lulls in stretches and can get bogged down in pedestrian designs, but when moving full throttle, it's a thrilling ride.

The game isn't concerned with narrative involvement or interwoven cinematic presentation to build its energy. The focus is on shootouts, one slow, deliberate step at a time, where the enemy builds a wall of fire smartly and skillfully, requiring visceral reflex and zealous strategy to stay alive. The balance between tight, claustrophobic city streets and buildings and more open, long-distance shootouts is deftly portrayed, maintaining a constant engagement where many games in the genre fail. Cutting up the central action with sequences such as the tank warfare in the desert—what a kick it is to ride with a group of allies filling in around you, taking out plodding targets far off in the distance—marks the game's many excellent design choices.

The smoke is more than a nifty effect; you actually move around inside during firefights.

Beyond the masterful craft exhibited in every intricate nook and cranny that draws these amazing set pieces exists a presentation of depth and detail that must be experienced to understand. And it does affect gameplay in certain instances, the way the extended line of sight pulls you more convincingly into the action, the way the designer can now show us just enough more natural environmental information that our senses believe we're in an actual space. I recall a number of scenes where I felt something different from the usual gaming experience: Soldiers pour from doors, explosions light up the sky, smoke billows from the ruins in recognizable ways, but it's all brilliantly sold through a new sensation of interaction; the deafening cacophony of sound only adds to the effect. World War II is a tired theme, but Call of Duty 2 pumps it full of so much raw intensity that even the harshest critic must stand back and take notice. It's one of the best games of the year. Brady Fiechter

"The balance between tight, claustrophobic city streets and buildings and more open, long-distance shootouts wis deftly

Call of Duty 2

Xbox 360

9.0 Score

There's not much new with the online play, but the great design sensibility carries over from the single-player

If does all come down to safe recycling of the theme, not every level is as incredibly good as the last

Developer: Infinity Ward **Publisher:** Activision **Online:** 16-player **Available:** November

Soul Calibur 3

Still burning white hot

"Soul Calibur 3 represents the ultimate evolution in weapons-based fighting."

Volvo remains the ultimate fighting-game freak.

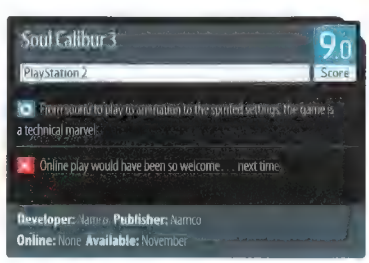
Is Soul Calibur 3 the best 3D fighter out there? If you have an existing bias for the series and are burning for another sequel—a sequel more satisfying than the slightly undercooked Soul Calibur 2—the answer's a booming "yes." The game may not hit with the same impact as the original Dreamcast masterwork, but for fans who've been there from the beginning, Soul Calibur 3 represents the ultimate evolution in weapons-based fighting—more precise, more developed, more draw to a broader range of characters and gameplay techniques.

The game isn't here to sway allegiances of the DOA/VF/Tekken camps: it's still Soul Calibur at its core, maintaining all the fighting fundamentals and aesthetic details that matchlessly define the series. A novice will pick up the game and essentially see Soul Calibur 2, but experts will dig into and, from my vantage point, appreciate the retoolings, both minor and substantial.

Appealing new faces have been tossed into the competition for Soul Calibur 3 (but just how often do you find yourself deserting old favorites?), joining the huge staple of awesome existing fighters who've been shaped with a few structural changes that shake things up. At first play, you may not notice much of a difference to your fighter's technique, certainly blasting out previously honed moves with instant ease and relying on strategies that have served you well in the past. But whether subtle or obvious, the impact of Namco's tweaking shapes the game into enough of a rearranged experience that you find yourself spending untold new hours perfecting your skills.

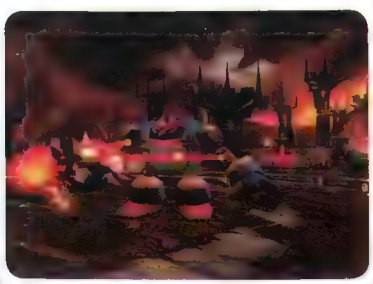
The final triumph of Soul Calibur 3 lies as it does with any of the best brawlers,

duking it out with a human opponent, bringing to the forefront the proper depths of the fighting engine. But where the game gives more than most before it is in the devotion to emboldening your interest in the single-player realm. There are tournaments to play, strategy-map scenarios, items to buy, tons of extras to unlock, and AI opponents that, while inconsistent and dodgy, maintain a solid place as entertaining competition. If all this comes off as an overextension of the heart of the game, it's at the very least welcome and brings a fun payoff for the investment. Time will tell just how effective the create-a-fighter option will be in holding your interest and providing sensible additions to the existing roster, but its presence is involving and will undoubtedly improve in the future. As for the whole of Soul Calibur 3 on current-gen hardwarew, there's not much left to improve. Brady Fiechter


Soul Calibur 3
9.0
PlayStation 2
Score
From sound to play to animation to the spirited settings, the game is a technical marvel.
Online play would have been so welcome . . . next time.
Developer: Namco Publisher: Namco
Online: None Available: November

SHADOW THE HEDGEHOG

My Shadow preview was pretty much glowing; and while I don't regret my jubilation over the three levels I sampled just over a month ago, I am somewhat disappointed that the overall game ended up being such a mixed bag. This is not your everyday Sonic adventure. Rather, the story—about a hedgehog on the edge that goes from saving humanity to contemplating whether or not to destroy it—twists and turns according to how you play each level, choosing to take direction from either the all-seeing demon eye that stalks Shadow, prodding him to exterminate the humans, or the designated Sonic cast member for each area egging him on to slay the "Black Aliens." Rather than create one long game with two or three iterations for each area (as is the norm) Sonic Team (or at least the SF-based faction assigned to Shadow) have created a six level grid (see inset) with variations on 22 possible locations. As a result, how good, or in some cases bad, Shadow is depends on what path you're taking. Certain missions, such as a bomb retrieval scenario (or detonation depending on how you play it) or the final push thorough the human military base, range from flawed to downright amateur, while levels like the Tron inspired Mad Matrix, Sonic Dragoon-style lock-on shooting stages, Eggman's Castle, or those familiar ruin excursions, range from good to great. The worst offender overall however is Shadow's erratic control whenever straight ahead speed isn't the focus. He is nearly impossible to navigate precisely while running and no matter what side you're fighting for, merely touching an enemy from either side makes him lose his rings; a combination that makes for some frustrating close quarters gameplay. Shadow can also drive a Jeep (although it's the worst implementation of a vehicle I've ever seen in a 3D game as they don't rev beyond an idle, handle like bricks, and pretty much lay waste to any segment of the game they are sanctioned for) and as everyone knows fires various weapons. The guns actually play a dual role, used for both for both firing on enemies and changing the colors on moving puzzles, an element of the game I do like along with the lock-on shooting, dual level scenarios, bosses overall, and the overall presentation marked by the fantastic CG and nicely integrated cinemas starring the gamut of the Sonic cast; like I said; mixed bag.



On the whole, Shadow is not the dark, story-driven game that I'd hoped for (the j-metal music even fades early on) but rather a hodgepodge of new and old ideas with minimal tuning. It's fairly obvious that Naka assigned a B-Sonic Team to develop Shadow as an experiment, to see what would stick and what wouldn't, to bridge the gap between generations while he was concentrating on Rush--the best Sonic the Hedgehog game to date, edging out even the mighty original, Sonic CD, and Chaotix (which Sega should include in their next console collection along with Mystic Defender, Comix Zone, Stimpy's Invention, Alisia Dragoon, E Swat, Moonwalker, Monster World IV, and Sword of Vermillion). Shadow the Hedgehog isn't a "bad" game but I was looking for something more compelling out of the first true spin-off since Chaotix. I narrowly recommend it for series die-hards, unless it keeps you from buying Rush, in which case you should opt for your DS all the way. Dave Halverson

> "...how good or, in some cases, bad, Shadow is depends on what path you're taking."

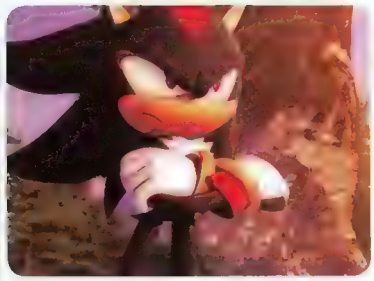
Shadow the Hedgehog — 7.5

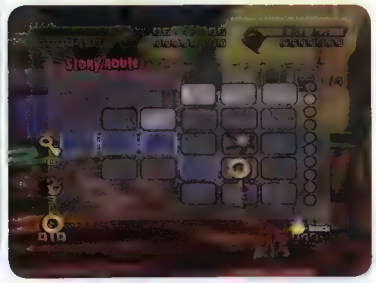
PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube — Score

+ Amazing CG, some great new devices and level design, and one great looking black hedgehog.

− Erratic controls at times, spots of archaic design and dated technology, and just not quite up to snuff for the franchise.

Developer: Sonic Team **Publisher:** Sega
Online: None **Available:** November 15





Six short levels in duration, but twenty two overall. What path will you choose?

Stubbs the Zombie

Rebel Without a Pulse

Brains! Brains! Brains! Brains! Brains!

There's a wonderful moment in the undead epic Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse where the shambling protagonist stands in front of a blood-splattered American flag. He's exhorting his zombie troops, all of whom are decked out like soldiers, and the scene is both a direct nod to, and swipe from, the classic film Patton. Stubbs' motivational speech consists of one word, repeated over and over and with increasing levels of intensity: brains.

Brains, the third-person perspective Stubbs the Zombie does not lack. It's perhaps the smartest "dumb" game ever created, littered with subtle jabs at the military, science, 1950s American culture, and gun-toting militia. It's also intelligent enough to keep things light and airy throughout, giving people exactly what they want: explosive farts, sheep riding, and even a little bit of peeing in the man's water supply.

Ungratefully dead, Stubbs destroys the Paradise of Punchbowl, PA. He eats brains the way a lesser man might gobble burritos. His zombie allies are born from fallen humans, and they help their master spread terror. The protagonist can choke his foes with explosive flatulence, possess folks with his severed hand, explode targets with his thrown guts, and bowl over crowds with his head. He works in sprayed blood, screams, severed limbs, and hurt feelings. And damn! if business isn't good.

The game does a wonderful job of setting a mood and tone. The soundtrack features classic 1950s hits such as "Lollipop" and "My Boyfriend's Back" as done by modern-day bands, and developer Wideload drops a sort of grainy filter on the entirety of the gory affair, making it seem as if it's being viewed as a newsreel. It's the perfect backdrop, and the game slowly transforms Punchbowl from faux heaven to wrecked wasteland as Stubbs tears through the terrain.

Pulse uses the Halo engine and, not surprisingly, takes on some of the beloved title's failings, As is the case with its spiritual predecessor, Pulse is largely linear, perhaps too much so, and doesn't do a very good job of indicating what its undead protagonist is supposed to do or where he's supposed to go to end the level. Sometimes, the game indicates an objective with a small green icon. Other times, no icon appears and Stubbs must either kill everything to proceed or find a destructible door amid a sea of non-destructible ones.

Play remains slightly unbalanced, due to the nature of Stubbs' abilities. Once the zombie has exhausted his ranged weapons, he must close with the enemy and eat more brains to replenish them. Without allies, and sans the ability to strike from a distance, this zombie is almost totally helpless—especially when the game throws him into a long corridor littered with machine-gun toting soldiers; snipers placed on balconies; and a flying, laser-shooting barbershop quartet singer. By the time Stubbs closes with these foes to eat their brains, he'll be three-quarters to dead, and a series of frustrating restarts awaits.

Yet there's a lot to be said about plowing through town with a zombie horde, biting brains (either alone or with a second player) and assaulting a police station, finally to be rewarded with a hilarious dance contest that smartly pays homage to both Michael Jackson's Thriller and the handheld game Simon. Brains, indeed. Brains good. Greg Orlando

"Yet there's a lot to be said about plowing through town with a zombie horde, biting brains..."

Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel Without a Pulse — 8.5 Score

Xbox, PC, Macintosh

Great sense of humor, excellent soundtrack, wacky challenges

Game gives little direction, gameplay slightly unbalanced

Developer: Aspyr **Publisher:** Wideload Games **Online:** None **Available:** November

Brains are actually a great source of protein.

Battlefield 2
Modern Combat

Field of screams, or: How I won the war by my lonesome

Couldn't hit the broad side of a barn, eh?

It's strange to think that in modern warfare, soldiers are so brave—or perhaps so devoid of brain cells—that they'd charge directly into gunfire. Gunfire, for the uninitiated, hurts. In just the right amount, such as, say, any, it could be fatal. Yet the soldiers in Battlefield 2: Modern Combat rarely if ever take cover and, in fact, seem bearish on the notion of charging right in to fire.

Still, the sort of foolhardy tactics demonstrated by the A.I. soldiers in Electronic Arts' Combat fit perfectly well with the game's run-and-gun mentality. Firefights are short and sharp affairs, mostly fought against forces who don't bother with pleasantries like cover or tactics beyond "see it and kill it." This makes gunplay in Combat an exercise in instant gratification: there's always someone popping in to shoot and be shot at.

All the niceties are in place: five separate soldier classes, the ability to switch weapons on the fly with a quick press of a trigger and flick of an analog stick, lots of vehicles, and even more ways to knock them out. It's a downright shame that after all that developer and publisher put an entire three seconds of thought into it before hiring actors who sound vaguely like Chinese people with headcolds to do much of the game's voicework.

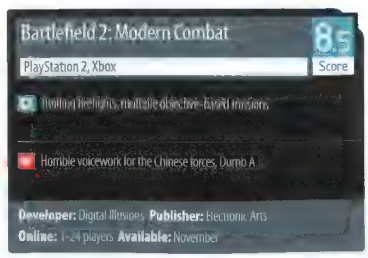
The game offers a single-player scenario with the Chinese invading the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan. Players get to fight over fairly huge environments with multiple mission objectives and various extra tasks such as destroying all the mines in a level scattered throughout. A given mission might require a soldier to blow up bunkers, then hold off an enemy counterattack before making his way into a tightly defended port to blow up three submarines. Or he might go mobile in Jeeps attempting to protect a hacker at three separate incursion sights.

Its soldiers may be dumber than buttered toast, but Combat's missions cannot be impugned. They're exceedingly well done; one extended contest pits the Chinese against NATO forces in an attempt to hold a small island and a neighboring oil rig. Push the enemy off the island, and he'll attack the rig. Hold the rig, and he'll attempt to force a landing with helicopters and gunboats—or simply storm the island and try to overwhelm its defenders. Here, the game does a fine job running soldiers ragged trying to defend both positions.

Players can win medals and gain promotions by completing certain tasks, and Combat even tracks how well a soldier plays with others. Weapons and weapons upgrades are unlocked throughout, and the single-player adventure serves as an excellent warmup for the game's main event: its delightfully frantic multiplayer contests.

Up to 24 players can compete online with Combat, and the game really shows its mettle when real humans begin to use tactics on one another. It's great fun to set up ambushes, use rocket launchers to knock out tank assaults, or simply bum-rush a disorganized foe with only the merest pause to mock him for stopping so many bullets with his face. Sometimes, war isn't hell but rather right good fun.

Greg Orlando


Battlefield 2: Modern Combat
8.5
PlayStation 2, Xbox
Score
Horrible voicework for the Chinese forces, Dump A
Developer: Digital Illusions Publisher: Electronic Arts
Online: 1-24 players Available: November

"Its soldiers may be dumber than buttered toast, but Combat's missions cannot be impugned."

It may indeed be over before it started

To write our September issue cover story for Magna Carta—one of the most exciting RPGs of the year for the PS2, blessed with extraordinary character designs and an engaging new battle system—I used a Beta of the localized game, written in English but before any actual English voice went in, but it's an Atlus game, so it never even occurred to me that the voice acting would be anything less than great. In fact I was so excited to play Magna Carta in its fully localized form that I purposely cut my play time short, in anticipation of the final reviewable build…

You know that saying "shit happens"? Well, shit really does because as fate would have it Magna Carta's localization fell right in the middle of the actors strike and so Atlus had to contract out the most expensive and important game they have ever brought to the US. So off to Canada they went…unknowingly sending their baby to the wayward home for crap translations. So foul is the acting, so flat and uninspired that it doesn't hurt the dialogue, it massacres it. But that is just the tip of the iceberg. On top of the already horrid dialogue these nitwits decided that it would be cute if they injected phrases into each battle…nay…each *kill* and so every time Calintz kills *anything* he exclaims "it was over before it started"…so expect to hear that two or three times per *every* battle, no matter how insignificant. But it gets worse: When the battle is over, even when he is alone or fought solo, he exclaims "good job everyone" or "all too easy". Who he's talking to I have no idea. But I'm not done; he also likes to taunt, and so now and again he'll exclaim "is that all you've got?" Problem is he'll say it seconds after he's struck, even if he's missed, and often address what amounts to ornate wolves… animals. Chances are pretty good that they don't speak English. Now figure in that for the first 30% or so of the game Calintz will do 90% of the fighting as the enemies are so weak you really don't need to involve the rest of your party, however, when you do for purposes of leveling up...yep; insult to injury. The beautiful Eonis might kill a dog and solemnly exclaim "These are the realities of war" …the dainty and beautiful Reith shouts "Check this out!" and the proud Haren likes to yell "let's bust some heads!" like some WWE roid-muncher, in the wake of maybe a level-one critter. To say that I was appalled by this token babble would be an understatement. Heartbroken is more like it. Why so dramatic? Because where in most games you can simply turn the voice off, these brain donors have attached it to the sound effects (!),so if you lose the voice you lose all of the audio outside of the soundtrack! Whoops! But what really kills me is the possibility that one of the most promising new RPG series (an Xbox 360 version is already in the works) in years may die a premature and undeserved death, and a great new Korean developer's dream with it…by no fault of their own. Not to mention Hyung-Tae Kim whose designs are nothing short of brilliant. Softmax has created a wonderful game but, if it tanks, how will they ever know that it had nothing to do with them; that they were the victims of circumstance? I feel bad for Atlus too. For a company that has always prided themselves on great localizations this is a most unfortunate turn of events. Outside of the acting and grating battle murmurs everything else about Magna Carta holds fast; the great battle system, unique flow, inspired soundtrack and incredible designs are all well worth your time and I implore you, even after my rant to give it a try. Just pretend it's 7 or so years ago when all US localizations were crap and you'll be fine. The idea is to get the series going so that Atlus can pick up the 360 version and make amends. Heck; you might even think I'm over-dramatizing things and actually not be nearly as appalled…although I doubt it. As of press time Atlus promised me (they were most gracious and apologetic when I launched my protest) that they'd "look into" separating the sound effects from the audio track, so, if it happens, you have me to thank. My suggestion was an all out re-dub and 30-day delay as coming out alongside DQ VIII is suicide in the first place, but for reasons they couldn't disclose that was not an option. It's in your hands now.

Dave Halverson

Magna Carta

PlayStation 2

8.0 Score

Innovative, engaging battle system, exquisite character designs, beautiful soundtrack, great CG

Ghastly English voiceover that you can't turn off

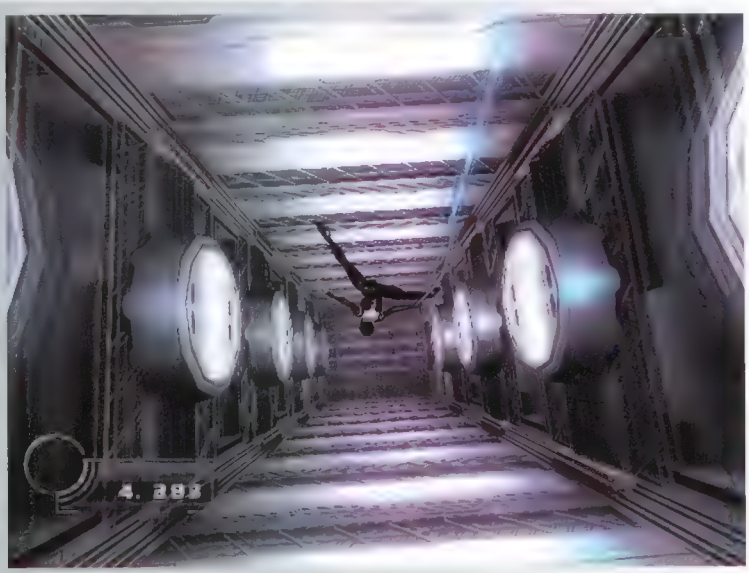
Developer: Softmax **Publisher:** Atlus **Online:** None
Available: November

AEON FLUX

Chung is King

"In a world where death is as temporary as heartburn, nothing is out of bounds."

The folks at Terminal Reality, for some strange reason, seem to enjoy mediocrity. They certainly have the engine, artists, designers, and programmers to make a great game, but once again they have bungled the most fundamental component in the creative process: the character. And what a beautiful model Aeon is. What a shame that she has jerky, hard to manage controls, especially given they've placed her in a world where precision is key—heavy on acrobatics and platforming. Even worse than BloodRayne, once again, TR has created a model without the proper joints to correctly navigate beyond walking or running in straight lines, so Aeon can't articulate a curve or smoothly negotiate transitions or turns, resulting in a frustrating disconnect between player and character. Lining her up or running a tight precision path is a frustrating, flawed endeavor in which the player must compensate where the designers have failed. When I asked them about this particular part of the process with BloodRayne 2, I was told that they hadn't planned for a proper turning radius (and the subsequent animation) early enough, which in hindsight I suppose was just a nice way of saying piss off, because they've only gotten worse. And it's too bad because once again they've created a great game otherwise, full of wonderful devices and gorgeous expanses. Terminal Reality builds great games around limited, poor-controlling characters. It's actually *what they do*. It's their thing…and I just don't get it. Both Terminal Reality and Glyphx had the opportunity to fix their respective characters (BloodRayne, Aeon, and Gideon: Majesco even had one of the world's top producers knocking on their door) yet they have chosen, once again, to release flawed software. I will never for the life of me understand this choice.

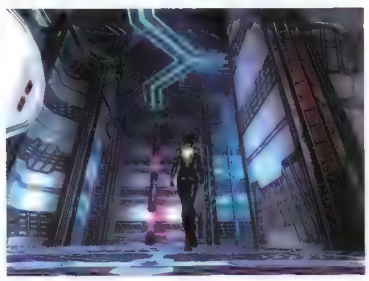


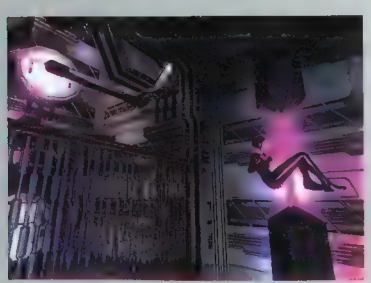
Back to the game: like a nimble Manx the leggy Aeon prowls Bregna City performing various exercises—edge and wall running, negotiating bars and poles a la Catwoman and BloodRayne, and spectacular bungee maneuvers—combined with ample doses of gunplay, nicely nuanced melee fighting, and two types of rolling scenarios—one along the lines of Samus, and the other a frustrating bit of sphere navigation in which Aeon uses a tiny roller to disarm various security apparatus. Why Chairman Trevor has chosen elaborate laser grids and pipe-ways to protect ball-socket locking devices (over say keys or digital locks) I do not know. Perhaps he was busy that day and put someone on it. In any case, after experiencing this treacherous spot of gameplay, the phrase "roll out" may induce slight spasms. On the other hand, highlights include a tactical recon mission to save altered Monicans (her fellow man used as guinea pigs in Trevor's sick science experiment) and a plethora of impressive future sprawls that really capture the essence of the Aeon universe—open expanses where the acrobatic puzzles do their best to shine in spite of the control. Things do become frustrating towards the end when heavily armored soldiers come into play, as the lack of a lock-on makes rolling and blocking a dicey proposition (on top of Aeon's moves which suffer an odd proximity disconnect making it difficult to chain moves) but TR's heart is in the right place in terms of gameplay…it's the execution they always seem to ignore.

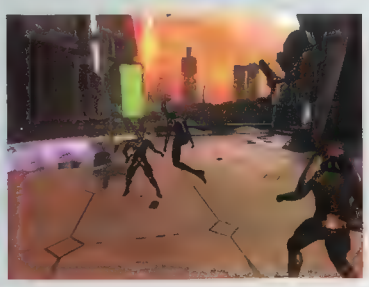
The game is also filled with clever diversions, playing off of the cat and mouse relationship between Trevor and Aeon, and bits of propaganda beamed live from bubbly undercover "hostesses" who almost always end up dying to get the story. In a world where death is as temporary as heartburn, nothing is out of bounds, especially when you're an assassin that plays an assassin on TV like Aeon. She even takes herself out in the game when she becomes fed up with her own existence, or perhaps she was merely attempting to put her in-game and film persona out of its misery.

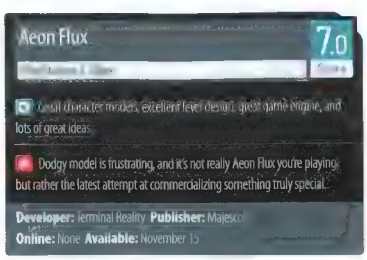
I appreciate Charlize Theron for her beauty and acting chops as much as the next person, but when all is said and done we should be playing a game and watching a CG or animated film starring a computer animated version of Peter Chung's Aeon Flux; a heroine that no actress could ever emulate. Dave Halverson

Such a beautiful in-game model. What a shame it doesn't perform as good as it looks.








Aeon Flux
7.0
Great character models, excellent level design, quest game engine, and lots of great ideas.
Dodgy model is frustrating, and it's not really Aeon Flux you're playing, but rather the latest attempt at commercializing something truly special.
Developer: Terminal Reality Publisher: Majesco
Online: None Available: November 15

"Capturing images of the dead is the name of the game in Fatal Frame, but it's not nearly as easy as it sounds."

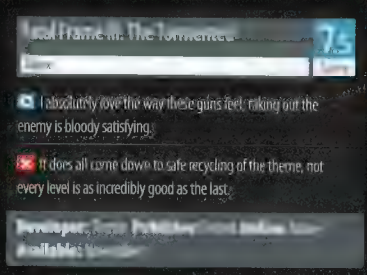
The first Fatal Frame hit hard on a visceral level and took its place alongside storied horror franchises like Resident Evil and Silent Hill. Its sequel Crimson Butterfly proved to be just as spooky as the first while making slight improvements to FF2's gameplay. Fortunately (or un- for the squeamish), Tecmo's raised the bar again with Fatal Frame III: The Tormented, and the resulting title is one that will make you think twice about playing with the lights out.

Photographer Rei Kurosawa is trying to get over her fiancée's death by taking jobs whenever she can to get her mind off of him. She takes a gig at a place rumored to be haunted...and after the pictures are developed, one of them has her beloved in it! Determined to investigate further, she returns to the creepy house, camera in hand, hoping she'll be reunited with him. Rei's dreams and reality slowly begin to melt together though, as a strange tattoo begins to cover her body...

FF3 remains similar to previous Fatal Frame titles in that your camera and your reflexes are your only weapons. Capturing images of the dead is the name of the game in Fatal Frame, but it's not nearly as easy as it sounds. Taking photos of the spirits in FF3 can be downright dodgy at times...in particular, you'll really love it when a ghost pops up right behind you, and then zaps out of existence right when you've whipped around and pulled up your viewfinder to snap a photo—and let me tell you, reloading your game and yelling at a creepy dead lady with a broken neck over and over to stay still isn't exactly my idea of glamour shots. After playing FF3, I can honestly say I know *exactly* what those people at department stores go through when taking those holiday family photos... it's a wonder they don't resort to violence.

That's not to say FF3 isn't a blast—I had a brilliant time wandering the House of Sleep and snapping pictures of the dead. You'll control three characters over the course of the game: aforementioned Rei Kurosawa, Miku Hinasaki (the heroine of the original Fatal Frame), and Kei Amakura (uncle of twins Miyo and Mayu from FF2). Each character's physics are slightly different than the other two, making for varied strategies when using the Camera Obscura. Visually, the game qualifies as eye candy—Tecmo did an excellent job of improving the cutscenes (they're absolutely brilliant and feature some great voiceover work), and the fixed camera environment offers chilling moments without ever being a nuisance to gameplay.

Before you go trick or treating, I have to get a picture...


I absolutely love the way these guns feel, taking out the enemy is bloody satisfying.
It does all come down to safe recycling of the theme, not every level is as incredibly good as the last.

FF3's story is intricately crafted, and although it ties in both the original Fatal Frame and its sequel, it never feels forced. Fatal Frame III hasn't drastically changed from its predecessors, but what Tecmo has changed only improves on the already successful formula, making FF3 creepier and more in-your-face than the first. Now scream and say cheese... Ashley Esqueda

The Matrix

The Path of Neo

Royal rumble

The Matrix: Path of Neo starts out strong enough, re-creating the office scene in the first Matrix film in a fun stealth-driven escape from Agent Smith and his cronies. The look is faithful and impressive, and the cut scenes, directed by the Wachowskis, bring the cinematic trimmings to a higher order. But creeping into the finer points here and increasingly infecting the game as you go along is a disarming lack of flow and polish; the game can feel overextended, trapping the good ideas that try their best to keep the wobbly fun intact.

Path of Neo follows some of the more intense scenes from the trilogy quite faithfully, filling in gaps and really giving you a sense of playing out the film. Now that Neo is at the center of the experience, Shiny has taken the time to really play up the fighting engine by offering a multitude of combo attacks that develop in a branching tree-like system. In theory, it's great, in execution, it falls short mostly from the lack of impact imparted by the fighting. Neo animates clumsily and feels like he has the mass of a mannequin, landing the complex barrage of punches, kicks and focus-enhanced attacks with far too little payoff to keep you deeply involved. Scenes like the burly brawl do have their moments, but the shoddy inconsistency finally keeps The Matrix: Path of Neo from working. BF

The Matrix: Path of Neo 7.0

PlayStation 2, Xbox

+ Combo tree a fun approach to combat

− Inconsistent design, there's not enough impact to the fighting

Developer: Shiny **Publisher:** Atari **Online:** None
Available: November

The Chronicles of Narnia

The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe

Finally out of the closet

When it comes to turning film properties into games, few do it as well and none better than Traveller's Tales, who have managed to somehow create a game based on a movie based on one of the most treasured pieces of fantasy literature in the world...and not completely insult the material.

For the uninitiated, the first book in C.S. Lewis's Chronicles of Narnia trilogy introduces four children (Lucy, Edmund, Susan and Peter) as they are being shipped to the English countryside at the beginning of World War II. While exploring the vast mansion where they are staying, Lucy wanders into a wardrobe during a game of hide-and-go-seek, and...behold: Narnia, stuck in winter, brimming with talking beasts and the usual split between good (The Lion, Aslan) and evil (the White Witch). To bring off this adventure (as it's portrayed in the film) in the gamescape, TT have incorporated a toggle on the fly system that makes use of each sibling's specific ability (each of which can be bolstered for the duration), along with team attacks where two children can join forces to overcome scripted obstacles and barriers. This makes for some great cause-and-effect scenarios, although you are the game's puppet, jumping between conventional action devices (such as shooting arrows and melee fighting) and icon-driven prods that direct you to what child to put where and for what.

Things start off a little dodgy, but in the end this is a fitting game for a film that has so very much to live up to, as did one Lord of the Rings, which as it so happens was written by C.S. Lewis's good drinking buddy, J.R.R. Tolkien. Dave Halverson

The Chronicles of Narnia 7.5

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GC

+ Beautiful graphics, great soundtrack, and as multiple character action games go, among the best of the lot.

− Extremely linear and instructional. Little in the way of freedom. This is a heavily pre-scripted movie game.

Developer: Traveller's Tales **Publisher:** Buena Vista Games
Online: None **Available:** November

1) Use them as a ladder

50 uses for your

tokobot™

10) Help you save the planet

14) Give you change for a dollar

16) Exercise for you 17) Watch scary movies with you 18) Turn into a train

20) Help you when you're lost 21) Bake you brownies

23) Spit out bombs at your foes 25) Fly you to high places

29) Help you lift heavy objects

33) Morph into a tank

38) Play it over and over and over 39) Do your laundry

What will you do with yours?

41) Be your samurai warrior

50) Be your best friends

EVERYONE
E
Mild Cartoon Violence
ESRB CONTENT RATING www.esrb.org

PlayStation Portable

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Review Gallery

Guitar Hero

PlayStation 2

Developer: Red Octane **Publisher:** Red Octane **Online:** None **Available:** November

9.0 Score

The game biz has music games coming out of its ears. Dance Dance this and Karaoke that…but nothing that goes crunch. Grooves maybe, but rocks…nuh-uh. And most of these games, let's face it, are pretty embarrassing. I got into Parappa and Space Channel and then called it a day until DK Jungle Beat made me hate Nintendo for about a month (we're back together) and now this. Hand me a controller/guitar and throw down stuff like Sabbath and Queens of the Stone Age? I am so 100% there. It's easy too; match the color on the fret board with the notes and rock-on…at least initially. Mastering multiple notes, holding notes, and nailing that crazy spaghetti takes (much) practice, but the quality axe is good to go. Now where are my groupies!? Dave Halverson

"Hand me a controller/ guitar and throw down stuff like Sabbath..."

Operation Flashpoint: Elite

Xbox

Developer: Bohemia Interactive

Publisher: Codemasters

Online: 1-24 players

Available: November

4.0 Score

If there were such a thing as truth in advertising, Codemasters' new first- and third-person war game would be called Operation Disappointment. There's very little to like here: the game is a giant eyesore, with blocky environmental textures, hideously rendered humans, and plodding animations for the soldiers. Worse still, there's almost nothing here to distinguish Operation Flashpoint: Elite from the horde of other war simulations born on the PC and then propped up for a second milking on Xbox. To the point: Elite is an extended session with Misters Been There and Done That, and the company, simply, wears out its welcome shortly after the training mission. Greg Orlando

Tony Hawk's American Wasteland

PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, Xbox 360

Developer: Neversoft

Publisher: Activision

Online: Multiplayer

Available: October

7.0 Score

It wouldn't be, technically, a year without the milking of the cash cow known as Tony Hawk. American Wasteland serves as the seventh game in the Tony Hawk skateboarding series and doesn't so much advance the extreme sports genre as much as it does gently nudge it forward with innovations such as BMX riding. A story mode turns a neophyte skater into an errand boy, toting that barge and lifting that bale to help a series of rascals build a skate park. The tasks are instructional, to be sure, but little about jumping through these hoops even borders on fun. A free-play mode returns Hawk to his origins and here, the game does not disappoint one bit with its go forth and explore approach. Greg Orlando

Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil

Xbox

Developer: Nerve Software **Publisher:** Activision **Online:** 4-p **Available:** October

8.0 Score

Up for another round of Doom 3, only a little shorter this time and at a cheaper price? Doom 3: Resurrection of Evil is an expansion pack—a good one at that. Not that much has changed in regards to the gameplay and basic level design: it looks gorgeous, monsters predictably jump out but still pull you in with their creepy presence and the frenetic action, it looks gorgeous, and there's just something about that classic Doom feeling that keeps you glued. Worth noting is the inclusion of a grabber beam gun, which allows you to move stuff around and pull shots out of the air. Classic Doom, Doom II and Master Levels makes it worth the buy. Brady Fiechter

"...it looks gorgeous, and there's just something about that classic Doom feeling that keeps you glued."

Serious Sam II

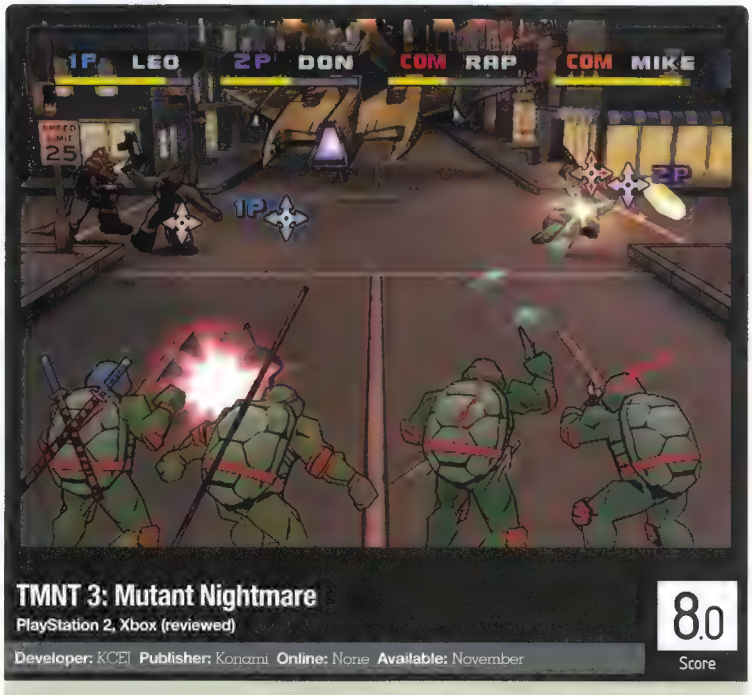
Xbox

Developer: Croteam **Publisher:** 2K Games **Online:** 4-player **Available:** November

8.5 Score

The grande FPS-stew that is Serious Sam blasts its way onto Xbox fresh off some serious critical acclaim on PC. And while it doesn't support the hi-res textures on the beasties the PC had, you'll be dazzled by Sam's massive panoramas, smooth interiors and freak-show demon hordes just the same. When it comes to balls-to-the-wall kitchen sink FPSs, Sam is the man. Big-ass demons, vehicles of all shapes and sizes, turrets, and a screen full of guns and demon reamers are yours from the get go. It's like Halo meets Painkiller meets anything by Planet Moon...It's meat 'n potatoes FPS all the way (no feet, limited enemy animation, light on adventure) but if you like sick shooters it's time to get ill. Dave Halverson

"When it comes to balls-to-the-wall kitchen sink FPSs, Sam is the man."



TMNT 3: Mutant Nightmare

PlayStation 2, Xbox (reviewed)

Developer: KCEJ **Publisher:** Konami **Online:** None **Available:** November

8.0 Score

Having just played the new Final Fight (say your goodbyes) I appreciate my Turtles more than ever. Welcome to the last bastion of quality, Japanese-developed beat-'em-ups. With TMNT 3, the Turtles team has wisely and deftly returned the series to its roots, adding spectacular diversity by way of diversions that feel more Contra than TMNT, while delivering the best martial arts action yet. The ability to purchase combos and skills, equip Ninja Scrolls, and perform team or solo "Ougi" specials make the action sticky for the duration, along with a scaleable camera, quality AI, and a hearty challenge. There's plenty of animation from the show too, along with some funky real time CG. Best beat-'em-up so far this year and the multiplayer game to beat for 2005. Dave Halverson

"Welcome to the last bastion of quality, Japanese-developed beat-'em-ups."

NBA 2K6

Preview

In a word, NBA 2K6 on the Xbox 360 is awesome. Everyone knows that NBA 2K6 is the best b-ball game on current-gen consoles and come launch it will be the only b-ball game you'll need on the 360. Sure EA's Live 06 is a respectable title on 360, but 2K6 takes it to the basket and slams it home.

NBA 2K6 is a control freak's dream. The flawless shot stick and dual player control is still intact on the 360 version. For the next-gen systems, the developers have implemented smoother passing schemes and better shot control. It was nice to see the Strip-and-Rip System working nicely in the preview build as well.

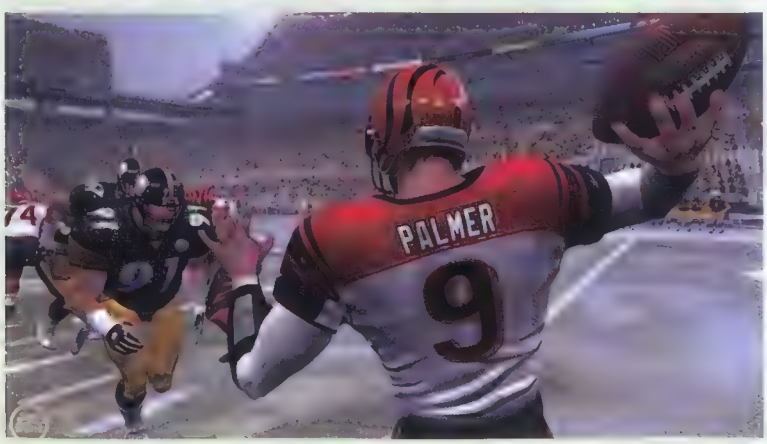
Visually, NBA 2K6 rivals any basketball game on the market. Since the 360 shows off higher resolutions, the textures are richer and the animations much smoother than anything we've seen. And even though the developers are still utilizing the same mo-cap data as they did for last-gen consoles, the 360 enhances them that much more – creating players that look more lifelike than ever.

Speaking of lifelike, I have to mention the cloth animations. As your player is running up and down the court, you will see his shorts swaying realistically and jerseys shift as arms are raised for a shot, guarding etc... At press time the developers were even working on a hair physics system. Let's hope it makes its way into the final build. **Tom Ham**

NBA 2K6
Point of Interest
Should we be excited about real-time sweat
Developer: Visual C Publisher: 2K Sports Online: Head-to-
matchmaking Available: November 2

"NBA 2K6 is a control freak's dream..."

I'd say the 360 has the dress code down.



If this was San Diego lightning would strike him...

"Zoom in close enough and you can even read the warning label on the back of the helmets."

Madden NFL 06

Preview

The launch of a new console just wouldn't be complete without the venerable Madden NFL Football series in the lineup, and for the Xbox 360, EA has created a game that will change football games forever.

Let's start with the obvious, the graphics. In a word, Madden is gorgeous – even in its preview state. For the 360, EA Tiburon used facial modeling from actual players. So folks like Peyton Manning, Brett Favre and Donovan McNabb; the face you see in the game is the real thing. Even though they couldn't scan everyone in the NFL (for the sake of time), they did manage to get a hundred or so key players. The uniforms are incredibly detailed as well. Players will be able to zoom in and see the actual texture in the mesh. Zoom in close enough and you can even read the warning label on the back of the helmets. No detail was spared.

A key change has been implemented in the play-calling department too – giving the player more options to choose from. In addition to the standard formation calling and Ask Madden option, you can now pick a play by type, by key player or even ask the Coach and the game will now save the last five plays you selected for easy access. The addition of key player play-calling is a welcome addition to the series. Just being able to select plays according to key skill positions is invaluable.

Throw away what you already know about Madden. The visuals, the sounds, the interface and presentation – for the 360 everything has been revamped, retooled and refined. Without question, this is what next-generation football is all about. **Tom Ham**

Madden NFL 06
Point of Interest
John Madden has not been inducted into the Hall of Fame!
What's the deal?
Developer: EA Tiburon Publisher: EA Sports Onli
stat-tracking, chat, matchmaking Available: Nove

FIFA 06: Road to FIFA World Cup

This year, EA have made the necessary changes to their FIFA franchise to compete with the likes of the Winning Eleven series and does it ever shine brightly on Xbox 360.

For the 360 version, 350 players from the FIFA World Cup have been meticulously recreated to the extent that die-hard fans will be able to recognize players on sight. And since the game is in HD, you'll be able to see details like facial animations, leg muscles flexing and even the textures of the various club insignia on the jerseys. Another key component of the 360 version is the audio. FIFA on regular consoles always sounded great, but moving up to 360 allows for grand stadiums with deafening crowds. The play-by-play commentary is courtesy of the Sky Sports team of Martin Tyler and Andy Gray and with the 360's processing power, players are treated to more insightful commentary based on what is happening on field.

What really impressed me most about the 360 version however, was how incredibly maneuverable the players were. Utilizing the same controls as current-gen console versions, the added player animations allowed me to execute moves I couldn't dream of before. Whether you're sprinting down field or slowing up to perform a trick shot, it's all incredibly fluid and smooth. Coupled with on-the-fly play calling and team formations, players anxious for the next generation of FIFA won't be disappointed. **Tom Ham**

FIFA 06: Road to FIFA World Cup
Xbox 360
Point of interest
Soccer is taking over the world
Developer: EA Canada Publisher: EA Sports Online: Head to Head, stat-tracking, chat, matchmaking Available: November 2

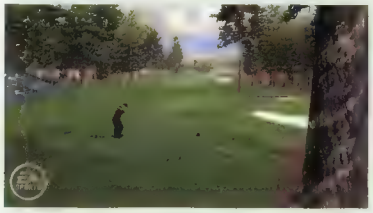
"Whether you're sprinting down field or slowing up to perform a trick shot, it's all incredibly fluid..."

Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06

To watch the latest Tiger running on Xbox 360 is like watching the real thing. What was a mere tech demo at E3 has turned into a golf game that rivals anything released before it. Although the game still controls like previous Tiger games (which is a good thing) the new graphics will knock you out.

For the 360, Tiger is all about realism. Improved lighting and shadowing gives player models an added level of authenticity. Details such as skin tone and facial expressions have all benefited from the additional power of the 360. The courses as well have been given a massive facelift. Players can now see individual blades of grass swaying in the wind and watch the wind create subtle ripples in lakes. I found myself just standing there, taking it all in – I played on Pebble Beach years ago and for a moment I felt like I was there again.

Thankfully, all of the new controls in Tiger 06 (like the shape stick) and the new aiming mechanism, have made their way to the 360. The challenge of putting has been tweaked as well, with the addition of the "putting camera." An elliptical camera that allows players to swing around and see the approach of their putt (instead of looking at it from behind); an added feature that definitely makes putting more manageable. Tiger is good to go: Commence launch. **Tom Ham**



Tiger Woods PGA Tour 06
Xbox 360
Point of interest
Developer: EA Redwood Shores Publisher: EA Sports Online: Head-to-Head, stat-tracking, chat, matchmaking Available: November 2

"Details such as skin tone and facial expressions have all benefited from the additional power of the 360."

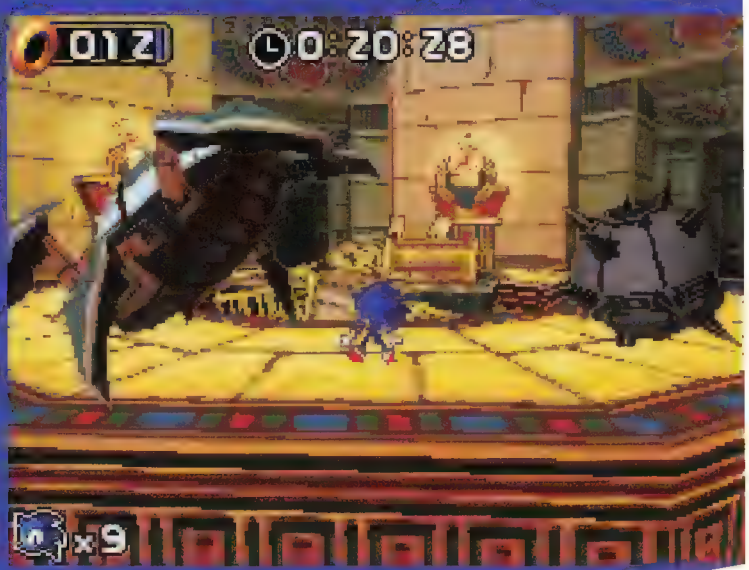
Sonic Rush

One small step for Sega, one giant leap for 2D kind

The launch of the Sega Dreamcast—largely because of Sonic Adventure—was one of the highlights of the '90s: All that Sonic (every character had his or her own game) in all that groundbreaking 3D was like a gift from the software gods. When all was said and done, the game had its warts (like atrocious ancillary models and glitches galore) but it was a landmark game nevertheless. Still, once seemed like enough. As far as I—along with pretty much every other Sonic fan I know—was concerned, it was time to get back to the business of taking the real Sonic formula into the next generation with a 2D in 3D Sonic to begin the series anew. That day never came. We said pretty much the same thing after Castlevania Lament of Innocence, which goes to show you how much Japan gives a crap what the core demo wants. They want more butts in the seats and survey says 3D is the only way to get them. I, for one, beg to differ, in fact, I'd wager that Sonic Rush cost about a tenth of what any of the 3D Sonics did to develop, and (as much as I love Heroes) I'd rather have it than all of them combined.

About halfway through the first level of Rush I was overcome with emotions—among them that most rare of feelings you get when you know you're embarking on something truly unique and special. You know those butterflies you get, anticipating how much there is, where it goes, etc.... well, they were dog fighting, because I realized something else too—something I've been waiting years for...I'm pretty sure I found Smilebit! Jet Set Radio Future and Gun Valkyire being two of my favorite games, I have sorely missed them since

"That Sonic epiphany we've been waiting for all these years has finally arrived."



This time Sonic's not screwing around....

the Sega re-org, and I can literally feel (and hear) their touch pulsing through Rush. That Sonic epiphany we've been waiting for all these years has finally arrived. Sonic Rush is the next evolution of the 2D franchise, following in the unforgettable footsteps of Chaotix as the second game in the series to take 2D to new heights. It's also the first action game to use the DS's dual screens as one vertical widescreen panorama. But Sonic Team doesn't stop at mere acreage; they proceed to throw in the kitchen sink. If you can imagine it, it's in here along with a lot of things I'm sure you can't. Sonic the Ride might be a more fitting name, were it not for the newfound gameplay that they've somehow merged with the madness. Sonic and newcomer Blaze get their speed thrills alright, but in the instances they do come to a plateau or flat spot, don't expect those familiar one-hit Eggman wannabes. Rush has enemies...beautiful Neo Geo-looking hand-drawn enemies, along with new conveyances, scaling tricks, ocular madness, and contraptions that seem like something Escher and Mattel might have devised... and that's before you arrive at the boss battles—big 3D boss battles that will challenge you like no Sonic bosses ever have. Gone are the pushover Robotnik-bots of the past. They went out the door with the vintage Robotnik, replaced by the proper Eggman or in this case Eggman Nega, a much darker, more sinister Eggman for the ages. These are more like Gun Valkyire bosses, only in crazy Eggman guise—extremely cool, often pretty hard, but always a sight to behold. And then there's the music. JSRF anyone? Oh yeah, all the way—it's absolute dance in the streets time for Sega lovers. This is the best Sonic soundtrack since Chaotix. And how about we top it all off with not one, but two full games! That's right—Blaze flies solo! Too good to be true? Not even. In fact, you can go buy it right now. Good-bye! **Dave Halverson**

Sonic Rush — 9.5 Score

DS

Phenomenal balance of speed and skill. It's old-school Sonic with added gizmos galore, incredible music and dual-screen action

The difficulty might be a bit much for fans that cut their teeth on '92. This is Sonic the way it was meant to be played

Developer: Sonic Team **Publisher:** Sega
Multiplayer: None **Available:** November

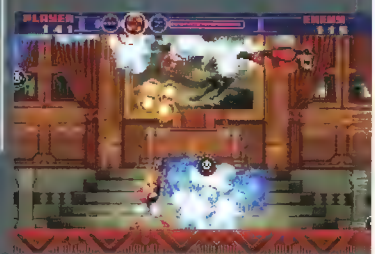
Gunstar Super Heroes

PSP — 9.0 Score

Developer: Treasure **Publisher:** Sega **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** October

Note to Treasure: no hard feelings for breaking your no-sequel policy. More than ten years have passed since the Genesis went supernova with the original Gunstar Heroes, and that same manic action, clever design and chaotic energy crackle with no less appeal on the perfectly capable GBA. About the only negative thing about this game is that it reminds you of a wonderfully classic mode of gamemaking that doesn't exist anymore.

Once again, you take command of Red or Blue, who careen through one radically changing action scene after another, from side-scrolling mayhem to top-down shooting to effects-based platforming to everything in between. Treasure assaults the GBA with every 2D visual trick possible, paying no attention to restraint while still maintaining a very calculated, very meticulous stream of design the whole way. The distinct colorings, the quirky flourishes, the eccentric boss setups, the sheer gameplay of it all—Treasure creates in their own delightfully strange world. And skimming from the appeal of our nostalgic past, the gamemakers drop some fun little aural and visual references from the original Gunstar and old-school Sega games into the mix. Touchscreens and eye-popping widescreens may be leaving the GBA in the has-been drawer, but play a Gunstar game and you're reminded why the simpler past is sometimes as good as the present. **Brady Fiechter**



Treasure throws in all sorts of design flourishes.

Frantix

PSP — 7.5 Score

Developer: Killer Game **Publisher:** SOE **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** October

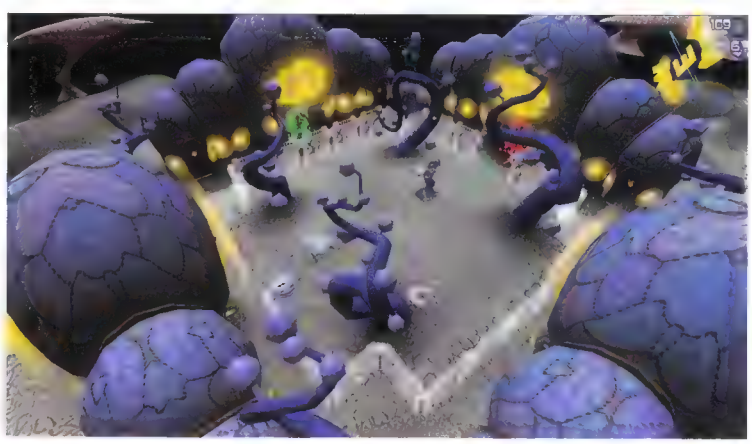
GripShift

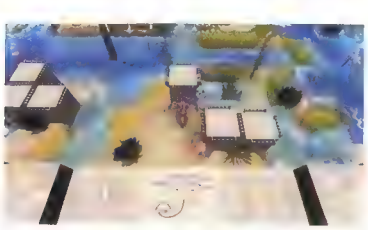
PSP — 7.0 Score

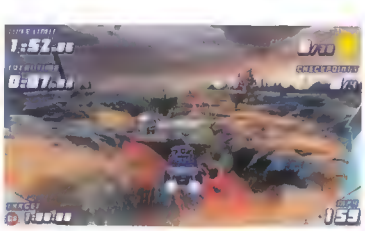
Developer: Stunt Interactive **Publisher:** SOE **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** October

There's certainly a lot to be said for the caliber of mobile games we're enjoying these days. Between the PSP and the DS, we're getting console quality (or sometimes better) games that we can play anytime, anywhere. That said, an important component of mobile gaming has always been their pick-up-and-play ability, which has been somewhat overlooked, especially on the PSP front. It's hard to whip out Death Jr., MediEvil or an action RPG for 5 minutes, however, Frantix and GripShift are built for exactly that.

The wistful Frantix presents wave after wave (some 180) of theme-based puzzle-action/brain-teasers utilizing every device in the known universe and then some. Bear, Kaz, Uri, and Meeper (the ChubbChubbs even get into the act) use warps, block-pushing, timing sections, color puzzles, etc., to collect the required gems to ascend to each new world: very fun; very engaging. GripShift offers the same type of pick-up-and-play satisfaction but in a completely different vein, playing off of Monkey Ball initially, before spiraling into a big stunt-driving potpourri. Simple timing stints and steering drills make way for massive auto-platforming arenas and a multitude of mini games, all car based, all built for twitch gaming and all very easy on the eyes and ears. In fact both Frantix and GripShift have great sound and remarkably smooth animation. Twitch gaming marches on. **Dave Halverson**







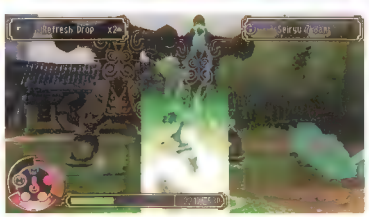
The completely fantastical settings work like a charm.

Kingdom of Paradise

Wonderful Climax

There's a lot to like about Kingdom of Paradise, beginning with the story—about a clan's revival after being all but wiped from the face of the Earth, with the exception of our protagonists, the melancholy ex-prodigy Shinbu and the sole surviving female, Sui Lin, a formidable warrior destined to become clan Senpai. Played out in real-time with excellent voice and music (the soundtrack is truly spectacular) and supported by sweeping vistas, exceptional character models and an intriguing battle system, it's everything you'd expect from Climax Japan on console, let alone a handheld. The gist of the game is unquestionably nomadic, divided between real-time action and adventure, traveling from place to place amidst the sprawling backdrop of ancient Japan, collecting Bugei scrolls for Shinbu to master his father's sword, and Chi Arts to cast powerful enough spells to forge ahead and avenge both his parents (murdered by the San-Yuan who also took the village) and the fallen clan. What makes it special is the way in which the story plays out as an overlay on the map, the character development, relationships, and encounters along the way (early on Shinbu takes a detour to pay his respects at his parents' gravesite sparking the first of many interesting plot devices) and arguably the best Climax production values since the Genesis era, from both the visual (talk about huge bosses) and presentation perspectives, evident in the game's intelligent, well thought through systems and commerce, excellent pacing and an authentic mythical aura. Even though it is spoken in English with the usual dose of slang thrown in for the dramatically impaired, equipped with a good set of headphones the level of immersion is quite uncanny for a mobile game.

...''it's everything you'd expect from Climax Japan on console, let alone a handheld.''



The only thing that holds Kingdom back is a lack of system memory, causing characters to repeat their lines as you re-engage them, and coming to grips with its battle system early on when the lack of any shielding requires you to gauge tougher battles by the amount of recovery time between strikes depending on your Bugei (styles mastered by obtaining scrolls). Winning or being overwhelmed depends literally on fractions of a second unless you choose to flee, power up your Chi, launch an attack, and repeat. But even still, if a boss's blade catches Shinbu he's in for a major health drain if not imminent death if you don't escape immediately and time your next attack. This levels out as the game progresses and you amass Chi and Bugei scrolls, but for the first few hours I suggest saving every chance you get. The game lets you save anywhere outside of battle so it's equipped to deal with the learning curve. Otherwise, this is the kind of action/RPG PSP users have been waiting for; a game that no other handheld could come close to achieving. In fact I'll take it a step further and say that upon entering some of the larger harbor towns, you'd be hard pressed to find PS2 visuals as rich. As with all new platforms, time heals all wounds. **Dave Halverson**

Kingdom of Paradise

8.0 Score

+ An endless array of sword techniques to obtain and master, great soundtrack, epic scale for a handheld action-RPG

- Can get repetitious especially when backtracking, and the overworld map could be more comprehensive

Developer: Climax **Publisher:** SCEA
Multiplayer: None **Available:** November

Legend of Heroes

PSP

Developer: Nihon Falcom **Publisher:** Bandai **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** November

A staple back in the glory days of 16-bit RPGs, Falcom has been relatively quiet on the U.S. front since, even though they never stopped producing quality software for Japan where their variety of game sells consistently well—which happens to be the type of game the PSP was built for. No longer a hot enough commodity to justify a console bid here in the land of the big license, the hand-drawn top-down RPG is the perfect prescription for portable pleasure, and their latest, Legend of Heroes, is a good one. The second installment of the famed Japanese series Gagharv Trilogy (which I'm sure just whisked by you as fast as it did me), LoH is the tale of two siblings ripped apart by war and one boy's struggle to be reunited with his sister. Taking the player from his boyhood to teen years and then setting out on a 50-odd adventure, LoH features anime overlays for key dialogue, ultra-detailed and lit SD characters and locales, and a nifty battle system that loads ultra fast. This is a really nice little RPG that arrived a little late to review, but hopefully I've painted a good enough picture for disciples of the genre. **Dave Halverson**

Extreme Ghouls 'n' Ghosts

PSP

Developer: Capcom **Publisher:** Capcom **Multiplayer:** None **Available:** TBA 2006

Although it hasn't been officially announced for the US, Capcom assured us it's only a matter of time before they announce the US release date for the amazing all-new Extreme Ghouls 'n' Ghosts—the next really big thing to hit Sony's PSP. While we're happy to bring you screens, they don't come close to doing the game justice, which blends ultra-smooth 2D animation with living, breathing 3D backgrounds.

The PSP may have gotten off to a slow start but games like this have a way of turning the tide swiftly. Imagine if Capcom were to follow up with Strider, Bionic Commando or that long-awaited Street Fighter action game they owe us… Their 2D cannons are certainly loaded, and I think we've all had our fill of Mega Man. **Dave Halverson**

The classic Ghouls' look has been preserved...

SOCOM: US Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo

PSP

8.0
Score

Developer: Zipper Interactive **Publisher:** SCEA **Multiplayer:** 16-player **Available:** November

The SOCOM series has become such a huge hit on PS2 that a quick assembly-line port of the game to PSP would have come with little complaint, yet Sony chose to give us an enjoyable new game with SOCOM: US Navy SEALs Fireteam Bravo. The game's a little stripped down in comparison, but the core designs that have marked this tactical-shooter franchise are well represented. While there's a limited member by your side and the commands aren't as robust, you have to drop the comparisons to the PS2 versions and take a look at the broader elements that work quite well for this PSP counterpart. Fans of the series will instantly feel at home with the look and feel, with Chile offering an original setting to extend the satisfying single-player experience. Clear areas of soldiers, go on sabotage runs, collect information—missions are basic and fun, packing an involved intensity that's been missing in early PSP games. The big issue that may turn off some players is the lock-on targeting scheme, which does diminish the more precision-strategy of the game, yet works just fine on its own. As one of the first games supporting full online play, SOCOM fans have much to pleased about. **Brady Fiechter**

Need for Speed: Most Wanted

PSP

8.0
Score

Developer: EA Canada **Publisher:** EA **Multiplayer:** 4-player **Available:** November

Wait: didn't we just get a Need for Speed on PSP a few months ago? This is the new Need for Speed, called Most Wanted, and while it all feels awfully familiar, it's a better game than Rivals. There's a ton of new events to race in, plenty of tracks to keep you happy, more than enough parts to toy with,fun boss battles, and the game just plays more like the console versions in most of the right ways; you know the drill. One of the improvements over Rivals is tighter feel in control, and the visual style takes a turn for the better. If you get tired of dealing with the cops and rival bad boy racers, you can assume the role of the law on your own terms and open a new round of vehicles. **Brady Fiechter**

Infected

PSP

Developer: Planet Moon **Publisher:** Majesco **Multiplayer:** 4-player deathmatch **Available:** November

Christmas in New York kind of sucks in Infected. The "Infected" are taking over humans and causing them to chomp other humans! To quell this awful Xmas mess, you play as Rookie Officer Stevens, who is somehow immune to the bite of the Infected and would appear to be the city's only hope for eradicating these zombie freaks. The action in the game is run-and-gun to the very core: you've got a weapon and you shoot everything that moves, clearing out a block of city space and then moving on to the adjacent area to repeat. The levels are fairly small, rewarding you according to the time it takes to clear them, which translates to cash to upgrade your character and weapons.

As simple as the action is, the hook to ramp up the strategy involves the use of a viral gun, which explodes the enemy once they've been effectively weakened with your main weapon. The idea is to build combos by shredding the Infected in packs, increasing the grade of weapon you use, the better the combo. Take this strategy online and you can even infect rival players, spreading your avatar to other players' PSPs. **Brady Fiechter**

Mario Kart DS

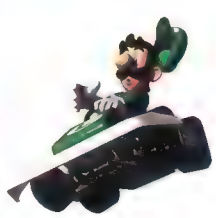
Nintendo DS

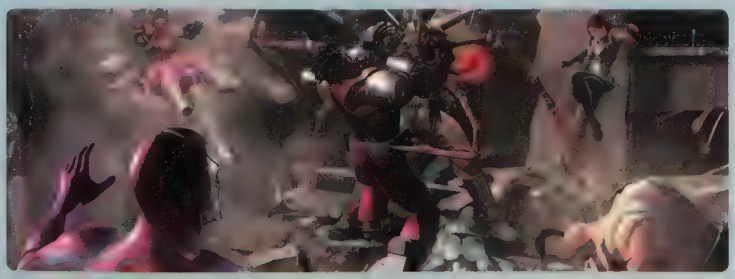
Score

Developer: Nintendo **Publisher:** Nintendo **Multiplayer:** 4-player Wi-Fi **Available:** November

Nintendo chose a great game to launch the DS' Wi-Fi service in Mario Kart DS. We all know and love Mario Kart (and if you don't, too bad for you), and it's such a unique little thrill now to be able to turn on the DS and connect to other Mario Kart players from around the world for some 4-player online action. Connecting painlessly to any hotspot, I was battling people online within minutes of turning on my DS and the play was fast, smooth and incredibly fun.

The game itself also delighted in myriad other ways. Joining the new courses (which are some of the best in the series) are ones from previous Mario Karts, making this a bit of a compilation analogous to the PSP version of Ridge Racer. There are tracks from the SNES, N64, GBA, and GameCube and this is a very good thing indeed. Nintendo has also added some really cool customization to the game. Not only does each character have two karts to choose from, you can also make your own decals for that custom online logo to make your friends jealous. Also, the 3D performance is very impressive for the DS. Really, this is probably the best Mario Kart game since the original. **Michael Hobbs**





Online

City of Villains

See what makes the bad guys tick

Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows 2k/XP	Video: GeForce 6/Radeon X800
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: Audigy 2+
Memory: 1 GB RAM	Internet: Broadband

Oddly enough, some gamers were expecting a massively multiplayer GTA-like experience with City of Villains, where they could mug, carjack and terrorize every day citizens—flexing their villainy in front of other online players. Unfortunately, current MMOs can't handle that level of world interaction. Instead, villainy in CoV ascends in the same statistical manner as heroism in City of Heroes: by rising through the hierarchy of the city's most influential factions, completing tasks for them and developing your reputation. You don't feel particularly nefarious for a good portion of the early and mid-level game, but CoV is nonetheless an eminently playable online RPG.

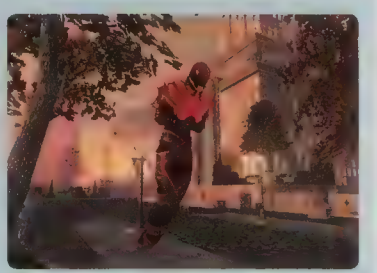
City of Villains is built on new technology and it shows. The main outdoor city zones are much larger and significantly more complex than the environments in CoH. They also have a lot more personality, and the city planning is perfectly attuned to the control and capabilities of super-powered characters. There are bins, catwalks, crates, stairs and concrete slopes placed in just the right location to keep villains blazing and bouncing through the streets across each distinct neighborhood. Of course the streets are not a problem if you develop flying powers. Mission locations are activated throughout the city, and though players can level up by fighting various street gangs, most teams prefer to run missions together as the completion reward is generous.

City of Villains makes it very easy to get involved. The team search tool is useful and comprehensive, filtering by level, zone and character type. Once teams get together, it's a breeze to locate and enter a mission. CoV has fast and entertaining combat, and the game doesn't enforce a strict group composition in order to be successful. The mission tasks range from clearing out every enemy, to robbing bank vaults, and kidnapping key NPCs. Each mission has a rather convoluted backstory, but the objectives often play out the same way.

Thanks to the shared servers (and shared billing—quite a bargain), City of Villains characters can tangle with do-gooders from City of Heroes in wild PvP zones like Bloody Bay. As we witnessed, certain archetypes (i.e., the backstabbing Stalker) are obviously *way* overpowered in PvP right now. At any rate, CoV moves the franchise one step closer to serious PvP. The lair editor is another fine addition. Just like the game's peerless character creation system, base design includes a massive number of assets to tinker with. Super Groups (a.k.a. guilds) can even schedule base raids against each other.

City of Villains is a great example of the current model MMO. It's accessible, customizable and has all the tools necessary to build communities. And though it borrows pretty much every archetype and advancement system from CoH, the powers allow for great multi-discipline character development. On the other hand, CoV (along with the current MMO top dogs) presents further evidence that the genre must evolve beyond the safe formula it has fallen into. **Mike Griffin**

Hellion punks corner a team of villains.



Arachnos spider infantry tangle with Longbow goodie two-shoes.

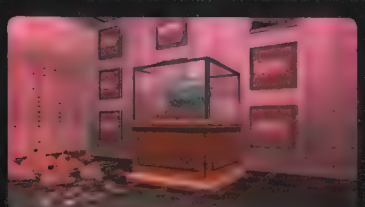
City of Villains 8.0

Covers all the basics with ease. Character creation and lair editor are superb. Mission is unique and fitting.

Minor client instability with physics particles enabled. MMO structure is becoming too predictable, and CoV doesn't change this.

Developer: Cryptic Studios **Publisher:** NCsoft
Online: Massively Multiplayer **Available:** October

Bank Heists

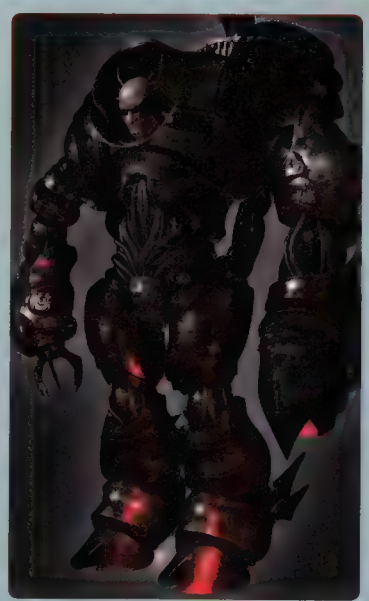


Bank Heist missions in CoV offer some of the most intense combat for full teams. The vault door is one stubborn chunk of iron to crack, requiring concentrated firepower from the team's most proficient damage-dealers. Meanwhile, guards scramble about in the halls attempting to stifle the heist. After the vault door crumbles in a shower of NovodeX particle physics, the loot shall be yours.

Mastermind

Based on a chosen archetype, Mastermind villains can summon a variety of pet types to their side, including ninjas, mercenaries, robots and zombies. These Henchmen, each with unique abilities and support powers, essentially transform the Mastermind into a one-man group. Clever MMs can also have their troops talk, dance, and—how charming—puke on command.

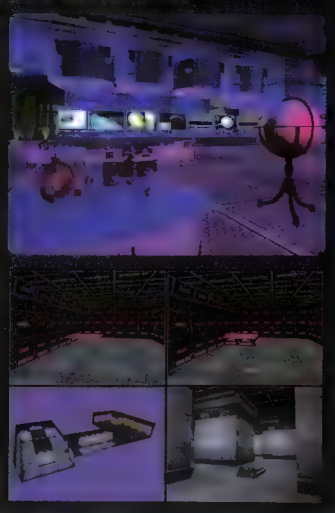
"City of Villains is a great example of the current model MMO. It's accessible, customizable and has all the tools necessary to build communities."



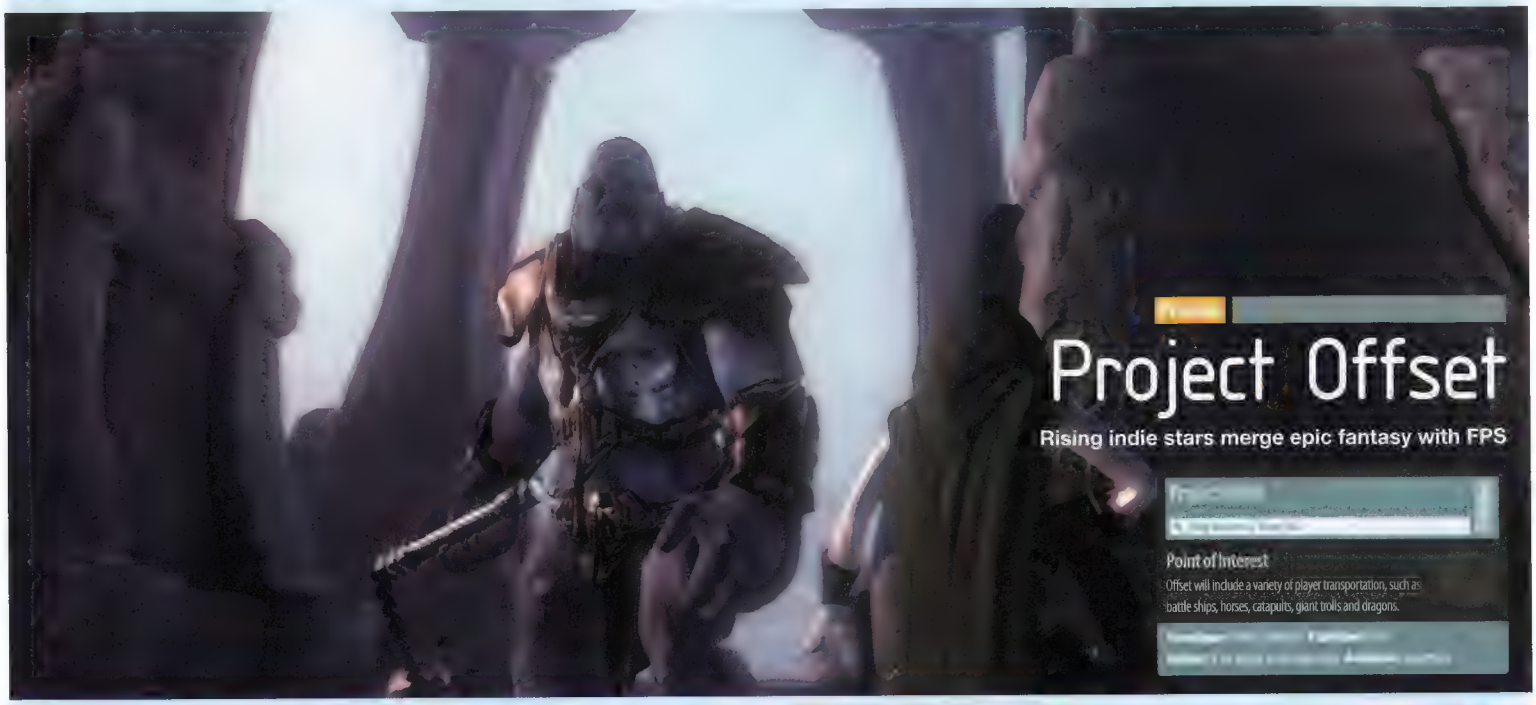
City of Villains includes many dedicated PvP options like Bloody Bay and the massive Golden Giza palatial arena, pictured left.

Welcome to my undergroud lair...

A massive array of sets, styles, furniture, gizmos and all manner of interactive accoutrements await Super Groups in CoV's excellent base building editor. Each Lair can also be equipped with an "Item of Power" that grants bonuses to the host members, and this Item can be contested in organized player vs. player Lair raids. Place those defensive turrets carefully!

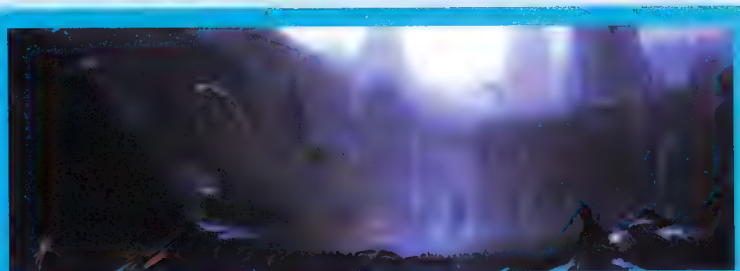


Welcome to the first installment of Play PC's Indie Circuit. We'll be focusing on the booming independent game development scene: homebrews, killer mods and promising new developers. With professional design software becoming more affordable and new indie distribution opportunities like Valve's Steam platform, there's some incredible work being produced independently. This month we check-in with Offset Software—on the brink of a big publishing deal—and their potentially amazing next-gen title, Project Offset. Also: Lionhead's Mark Healey, author of the fantastically original Rag Doll Kung Fu, drops a little indie knowledge.


Project Offset
Rising indie stars merge epic fantasy with FPS
Point of Interest
Offset will include a variety of player transportation, such as battle ships, horses, catapults, giant trolls and dragons.

Interview

Sam McGrath, Founder and Technical Director, Offset Software



Profile: Formerly of Sid Games Sam acted as CTO, lead programmer and lead designer on Savage, a hybrid FPS/RTS title. Savage won the grand prize at the 2004 Independent Games Festival and 3D Games was nominated for Rookie Studio of the Year at the Game Developer's Conference that same year. The Offset engine is Sam's baby.

play: Project Offset is being pitched as the first "Epic Fantasy FPS." Surely you had this idea in mind before Offset was formed. Why does the core concept strike a chord with you?

Sam McGrath: It's always been frustrating to me that games set in fantasy universes are almost always RPGs or some sort in our mind, wizards and elves, because I suppose to "make believe fighting." I've wanted to create a game in a beautiful and expansive fantasy universe where you need to use your reflexes and aiming skill to succeed.

Take us through the process of going forward with development on a triple-A next-gen project with uncertain funding. How do you assemble the gear and what kind of production timeline do you start with?

What we've done so far has been created with 2 computers, a couple of 3ds authoring tools, Photoshop, Visual Studio and some sound software. Even next-gen technology can be created on a standard PC with software anyone can buy. The key is knowing what to focus on. We've spent a great deal of our time doing R&D and developing tools that allow us to get the art content into the engine really quickly. On the programming side, I've been busy writing tools that take as much work as possible for the artists, that's so our small studio can succeed and meet within. On the art side, Travis and Trevor (the Stenger brothers, formerly 3D artists from Epic) have been working with ZBrush to model extremely high-detail models in a short amount of time.

> "...next-gen technology can be created on a standard PC with software anyone can buy. The key is knowing what to focus on."

You've certainly accomplished a lot as a team of three. What is the crucial crux point where a major next-gen project simply becomes too much for a very small team to handle?

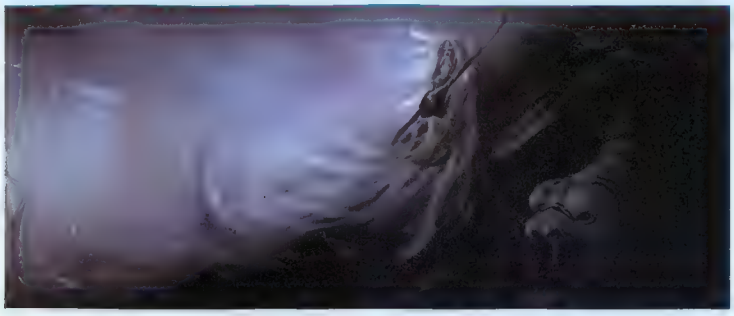
Even though we've developed tools that really streamline the process, there's no getting around the fact that the art content required for a project like this one is huge. We want every part of this game to live up the standard of quality we set with the work we've done so far, and to do that will require expanding the team.

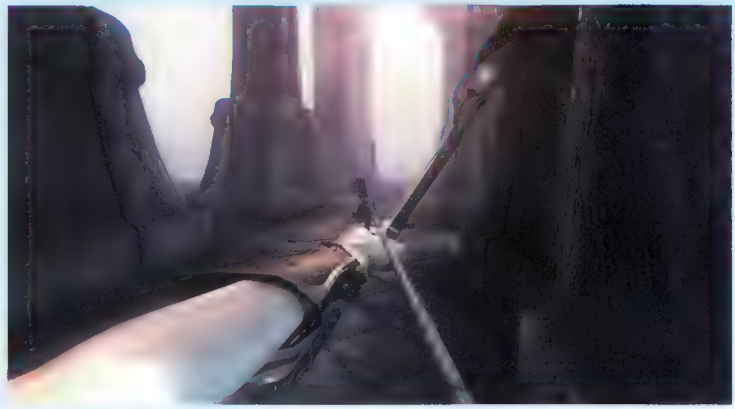
How large would you like to eventually grow this team?

We want to keep us as a size that's commutable to a large current-gen project team, sometimes we're stopping hanging up to 80 man months, but we feel that it can be done with a much smaller team, given the right tools.

The Offset Engine looks killer. Of all the proposed next-gen features, pick a couple in particular that should really enhance the action and setting of a game like Project Offset.

A really important advance in this engine is its procedural quality control tool. This is something that will be necessary for more effects having been done by artists to enhance the sense of realism, but not something that's been possible. And in a truly practical way at real time. We also have a completely HDR lighting system with real physical light over the entire scene, and normal and displacement





Frazetta influences in effect.

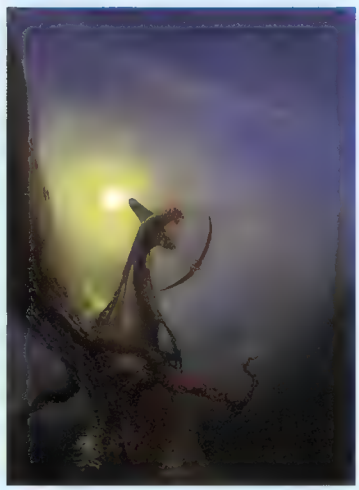
characters and even particle systems.

Have any settings or artists influenced the style of the Project Offset universe?
We of course love the classic fantasy movies like Lord of the Rings, Neverending Story, and Clash of the Titans. Travis and Trevor have been heavily influenced by landscape painters like Albert Bierstadt and the fantasy artists Brom and Frank Frezetta.

You have a pretty ambitious multiplayer concept in mind for Offset. How are you going to bring players together online, and how important is the idea of persistent stats?
The game will be set up like other FPSs like Battlefield 2 or Wolfenstein: ET, with many servers (either official or user created), and the player being able to connect to any of those servers. Persistent experience (points) is an aspect of the game that we think players will really enjoy. It will allow them to gain a status and ranking that everyone in the game will be able to see, as well as allowing them to unlock certain items and abilities. This shouldn't be confused with how MMOs work, though. Rather than being an integral part of the game, persistent experience is just an added layer on top of the core game, which will keep things interesting for players.

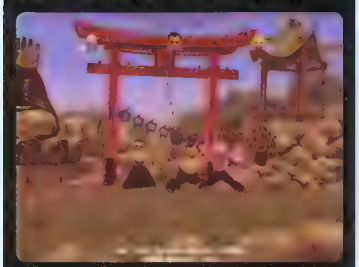
Very interesting. What sort of general character classes are you hoping to include and how will stats affect combat?
A player can choose from five character classes. Each class has special abilities, and experience is gained by using those special abilities as well as fighting and defending. As you progress through a game, your experience will enhance your abilities in various ways. At the end of a game, this experience is reset back to zero, but whatever experience you gained is added to your persistent experience, which is stored globally.

Thanks for your time, Sam.



Rag Doll Kung Fu

Author: Mark Healey **Publisher:** Valve (Steam)



Currently working on a top-secret "bad ass" project at Lionhead, Mark Healey recently completed his independent fighting/dancing/freeform 2D title Rag Doll Kung Fu, available for under $20 bucks through Steam. Funny, colorful and trance inducing, RDKF is sort of like Super Smash Bros. with a madly innovative mouse-based control scheme...and hilariously campy FMV. When asked if the industry is ready for a big indie push, Mark offered:

"I think the answer is absolutely yes, and I think it's the way things are going. It makes a lot of sense, like the automatic patching/updates that Steam offers: it's so perfect. It certainly makes it much easier for small teams—which I am a big fan of, they tend to be more passionate about what they are doing—to do more risky or non-proven genres. I think the industry, as a whole, really needs that right now. Many of the major publishers are taking this kind of thing much more seriously, and the consoles are going this way too. I only hope that it doesn't become saturated with old licenses, like the current mobile phone games."

Sporting a chique rubber cap, Mark discusses a scene with fellow actors.

Review

Call of Duty 2

Best. WW2 shooter. Ever.

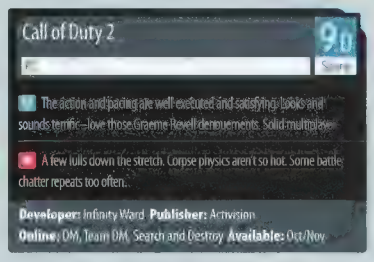
Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows XP	Video: GeForce 6800/ATI X800, 128 MB RAM
Processor: 2.4 GHz CPU	Sound: Audigy 2+
Memory: 512 MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

Call of Duty 2 has made life very difficult for any developer that is currently designing a WW2 shooter. Players won't soon forget the majesty of CoD 2's campaign. Expectations will be greater than ever. Maybe Infinity Ward has the longest road ahead, trying to trump itself in the inevitable follow-up. For now, they can bask in the glow of a truly superior achievement.

Call of Duty 2's gameplay is rooted in traditional FPS mechanics: gameplay designed for twitch entertainment. The overdose of realism comes through in the striking presentation of the game. It's mercilessly violent in its depiction of World War 2 ground combat. Critically wounded enemies scream and flail to the ground, sometimes crawling away to die in a corner. Dog-fighting planes buzz angrily overhead, but they're hardly audible below the frightening din of a mounted machinegun tearing through half a squad. Close-ups of fellow soldiers have them holding an eerily realistic countenance, nervous but full of youthful gusto. The sounds of the machines of war, of bombs and shrapnel and men dying in lands far from their home: vivid reminders that WW2 totally sucked. And Call of Duty 2 has you pulling the trigger in the middle of it all.

The action in CoD 2 is really, really good—especially on higher difficulty where enemy AI becomes more adaptive, not just stronger or more durable. Infinity Ward has ensured that players follow a fairly linear path to objectives, and while this guidance feels slightly contrived in a few areas (i.e., incongruous arrangements of minefield warning signs), it's easy to surrender to the shepherd's hand when the direction and scripting are so impressive. It is during CoD 2's least scripted sequences that rehashed objectives sometimes trip up the game's rhythm. For example, the slow house clearing routine in small villages can wear thin, simply because it's overused. The execution is nonetheless first rate.

We're arriving late with this review, and most CoD fans will have already scooped up the sequel—but for everyone else: even if you're completely spent on WW2-based stuff, Call of Duty 2 is a must-play game. It's high tech and high impact, extremely well directed and epic in scope. If you have the system to make it happen, crank everything up and enjoy one of the year's best releases. **Mike Griffin**


Call of Duty 2
9.0
Score
The action and pacing are well executed and satisfying. Looks and sounds terrific—love those Graeme Revell derivements. Solid multiplay.
A few lulls down the stretch. Corpse physics aren't so hot. Some battle chatter repeats too often.
Developer: Infinity Ward Publisher: Activision
Online: DM, Team DM, Search and Destroy Available: Oct/Nov

"For now, they can bask in the glow of a truly superior achievement."

Review

Star Wars Battlefront 2

The force is tepid in this one

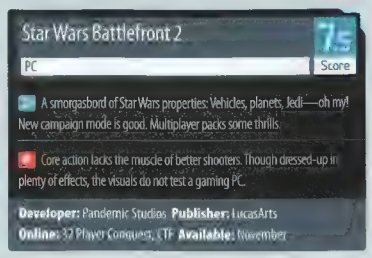
Recommended system specs	
OS: Windows XP	Video: GeForce 6600/ATI X700
Processor: 2.0 GHz CPU	Sound: Audigy 2+
Memory: 512 MB RAM	Internet: Broadband

Reaction to last year's Star Wars Battlefront ran the gamut from "This is a dream come true!" to "Meh"—with the latter becoming more prevalent as the game's hype tapered off and server populations dwindled. Battlefront supplied a solid multiplayer game (with a lame server browser), but the campaign was clearly lacking substance. Pandemic has remedied this ailment in Star Wars Battlefront 2. However, the integrity of the action is still lacking a certain refinement.

Battlefront 2 has a proper single-player campaign this time: Rise of the Empire. It is a real objective-based campaign that follows the elite 501st Stormtrooper infantry across a war torn galaxy. All the heavy movie moments are on display: the dissension of the supreme chancellor, the betrayal of the Jedi, and so forth. Familiar Episode III locales and vehicles, in addition to playable Jedi cameos, help to make the Rise of the Empire mode a fairly enjoyable run. And while Pandemic makes good use of objectives to milk the level design, the game really needed some high quality scripted events to massage the pacing, as it tends to skip along in abrupt steps. Also, just like last year's game, the action feels too *soft*. Whether in first or third person perspective, there simply isn't enough impact in the presentation of the action.

Much of that tenuous action is repaired online through sheer intensity. There's no denying the excitement of piloting a starfighter right into the belly of a massive Imperial ship, hopping out, and launching a volley of rockets into the ship's life support systems. Between all the game modes and vehicles across 16 new maps, Battlefront 2 is a more viable multiplayer title than its predecessor.

As we've come to expect from Star Wars titles, the sound in Battlefront 2 is superb—pulled straight from the audio pool of the feature films. Some concessions are apparent in the graphics, possibly to accommodate ease of portability between platforms, but Pandemic makes good use of particles, color and bloom to enhance the cinematic feel of each film-inspired environment. It's a shame that Battlefront 2's core action does not live up to its ambition, and yet it's certainly a game worth playing. **Mike Griffin**


Star Wars Battlefront 2
PC
7.5
Score
A smorgasbord of Star Wars properties: Vehicles, planets, Jedi—oh my! New campaign mode is good. Multiplayer packs some thrills.
Core action lacks the muscle of better shooters. Though dressed-up in plenty of effects, the visuals do not test a gaming PC.
Developer: Pandemic Studios Publisher: LucasArts
Online: 32 Player Conquest, CTF Available: November

Preview

Hellgate: London

Cutting a path through damnation

It would be wise for, say, citizens of the not-too-distant future to avoid such things as inviting a demon horde to take up residence. Barring that, it would wise if said citizens stocked up on guns and plenty of hellspawn-reducing ammunition.

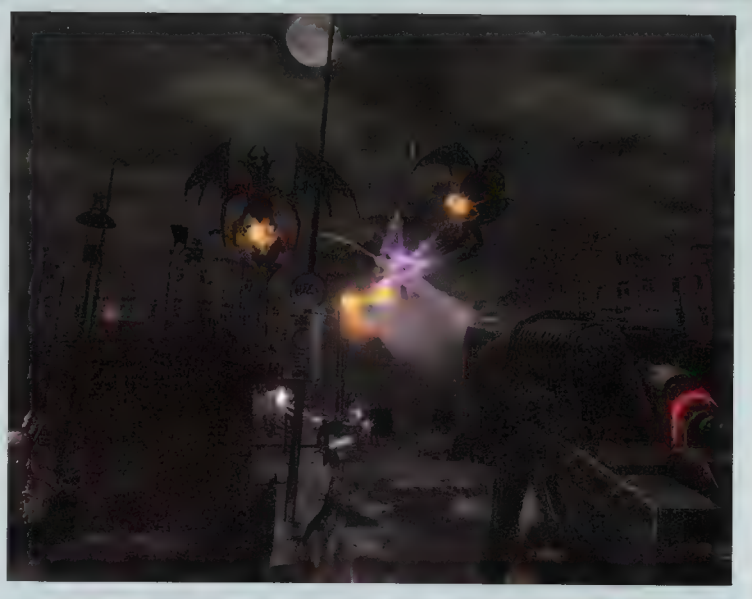
Welcome to Hell on Earth. London has been taken over by Satan's imps and that means one thing for the population: bad news. As a Londonite in the first-person perspective, players must fight the forces of evil, by which it is meant shoot them in the face until the end credits roll.

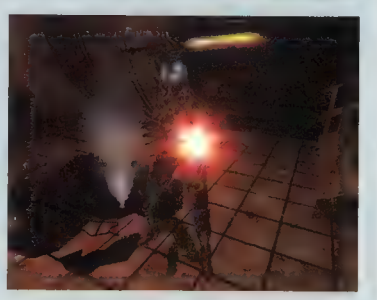
London offers something rather novel in a fusion of role-playing elements with first-person gunplay. Heroes will be customizable both by look and character class; only one such class, the Templar, has been shown, but more are in the works. Each character, in proper RPG fashion, will be governed by a series of statistics modifying his or her abilities in combat.

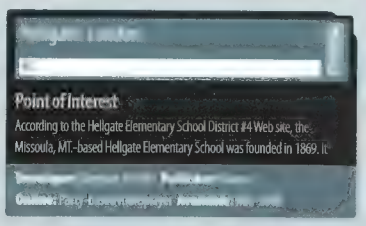
Both technology and sorcery can be used to defeat the game's persistent evil, and Flagship's intent here is to provide players with a great wealth of weaponry and armor that is modifiable. Moreso, each piece of armor or gun will be almost unique in that it carries its own set of statistics, making two identical items different in their ability to hurt or protect. Weapons can be dual-wielded, and will have five different damage capabilities including fire, physical, spectral, electric, and toxic—each presenting its own brand of havoc. Far-flung devices such as the Firefly will enable human defenders to spray death (the game seems to emphasize wide, area-based attacks as opposed to tiny projectiles requiring precise aiming), and it will be possible to hold a melee-based weapon in one hand and a gun in the other.

Central to London's core is a series of randomly generated dungeons. No two games will play the same, although there will be central areas that are common to every experience. Quests will allow players to gain allies or new weapons and these, too, are not preset.

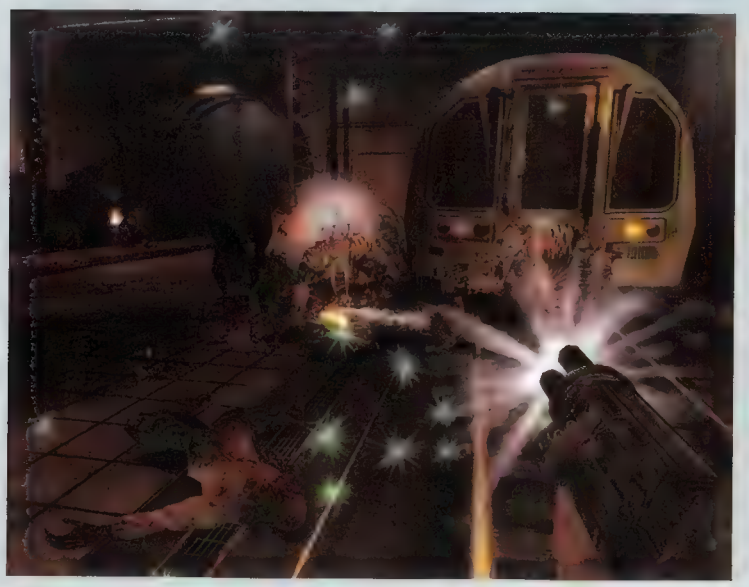
The game remains still early in its development. Yet there are good omens to be had for the demon-infested game. Multiplayer action, although its scope and nature is undetermined, is a certainty. An already stable framerate promises some smooth slaughter. Perhaps best of all, this hellish London is being created and supervised by Bill Roper and other ex-Blizzard employees—the people responsible for such RPG classics as Diablo. Things may well be as rock band AC/DC mused: "If this is hell, then you can say, it's heavenly." **Mike Griffin**

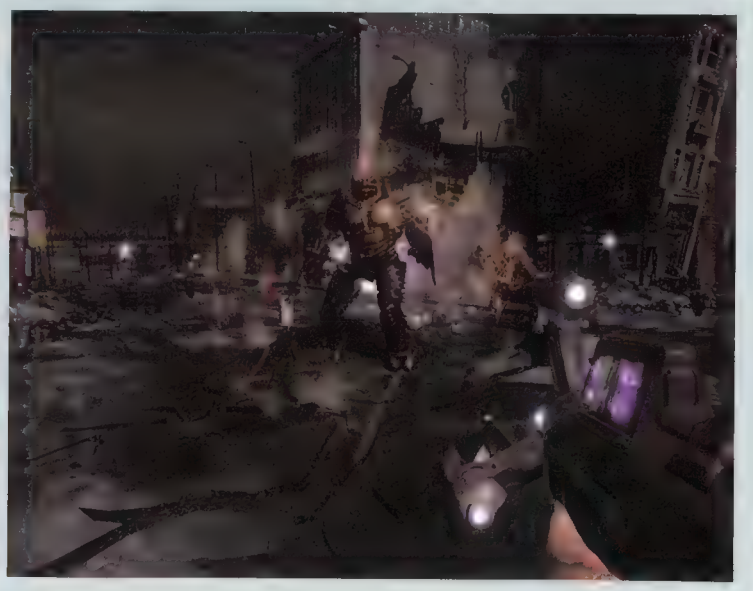





Point of Interest
According to the Hellgate Elementary School District #4 Web site, the Missoula, MT.-based Hellgate Elementary School was founded in 1869. It

"London offers something rather novel in a fusion of role-playing elements with first-person gunplay."



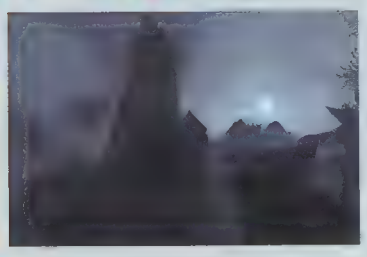


Postscript

BlizzCon and The Burning Crusade

Blizzard Entertainment's first annual BlizzCon was an enormous success, with some 8,000 happy fans crowding into the Anaheim Convention Center in late October to celebrate the company's beloved franchises and characters. Dozens of attendees donned the vestments of popular Blizzard avatars, from night elves to public enemy no.1, Arthas.

Blizzard was pleasantly interactive, staging developer meet-and-greet sessions and running several large Q&A panels to discuss elements of art design, multiplayer gameplay and, with World of Wacraft interest firmly in focus, class balance and itemization. Team leads Rob Pardo and Tom Chilton had the unenviable task of explaining the origin and development of each WoW character class, despite facing a mob of enraged Paladins (disguised in street clothes) demanding class revamps. The duo carefully demonstrated Warcraft 3's influence on each of World of Warcraft's character classes, drawing out themes and abilities to match the storyline and origins of each race. Many class tweaks will arrive in the next series of patch updates.



NPD PC Game Sales

01. MS Age Of Empires III - Microsoft
02. Quake 4 - Activision
03. F.E.A.R. - Vivendi Universal
04. F.E.A.R. Director's Edition - Vivendi Universal
05. Quake 4 Special Edition - Activison
06. The Sims 2 Nightlife Expansion Pack - Electronic Arts
07. World Of Warcraft - Vivendi Universal
08. Black & White 2 - Electronic Arts
09. Battlefield 2 - Electronic Arts

The biggest news of the show was the unveiling of The Burning Crusade, World of Warcraft's forthcoming expansion pack. Historically, a massively multiplayer game's first x-pack will often determine the game's long term success—and there are certain key elements that players look for. A new playable race is a big one, and TBC will add Blood Elves to the Horde side while an unannounced new race will join the Alliance cause. Although the Blood Elves have a past that puts them squarely at odds with the current Alliance, many players perceive this choice as a way to add some good looks and bright, lively areas to the otherwise somber, feral and haunted areas of the monstrous Horde lands. Rumors abound regarding the identity of the second race, but Blizzard is the Fort Knox of game industry secrecy. The Alliance race will only be revealed when the time is right.

On all other fronts, the expansion is going to deliver the goods for the five million active WoW players worldwide: the character level cap is being raised to 70, new Talents (more character customization) will be introduced, and several high end catacombs and towers will enter the world—each with a connection to Warcraft's long-running lore. For competitive players, new PvP Battlegrounds will ship with the expansion. Drawing upon the vast size of the Warcraft universe, Blizzard is also adding an entirely new otherworldly continent, Outland, reachable only through the Dark Portal. Players will have to band together in a server-wide event to activate the portal. Controllable flying mounts and other cool perks available only in Outland should inspire players of all levels to join in.

As the expansion title would indicate, the demonic Burning Legion has been simmering and growing, preparing for another sweeping crusade against Azeroth. With so many world-changing events, the entire Warcraft storyline (across games, novels and manga) is being progressively moved forward. Warcraft die-hards are thrilled when they see new story events that reference the past, but that feeling may be lost on players who first entered the franchise through WoW. To remedy this (while adding spectacular instance objectives), Blizzard will open the Caverns of Time. Here, players can experience epic moments in Warcraft lore—perhaps thousands of years in the past—and participate in the events that changed the world. The course of history must remain intact, no matter how terrible the result, or the structure of Time itself may crumble.

Needless to say, Blizzard is preparing an exhaustive, requisite-fulfilling whopper of an expansion pack. As World of Warcraft continues to ride its yearlong Top 10 sales streak, and with interest in Starcraft: Ghost back on the rise (playable Zerg in 16p multiplayer—who could resist?), BlizzCon served to demonstrate why this company is still kicking ass and enthralling fans: the quality of the experience comes first with Blizzard, and players recognize that...even if the games arrive a year or two late!

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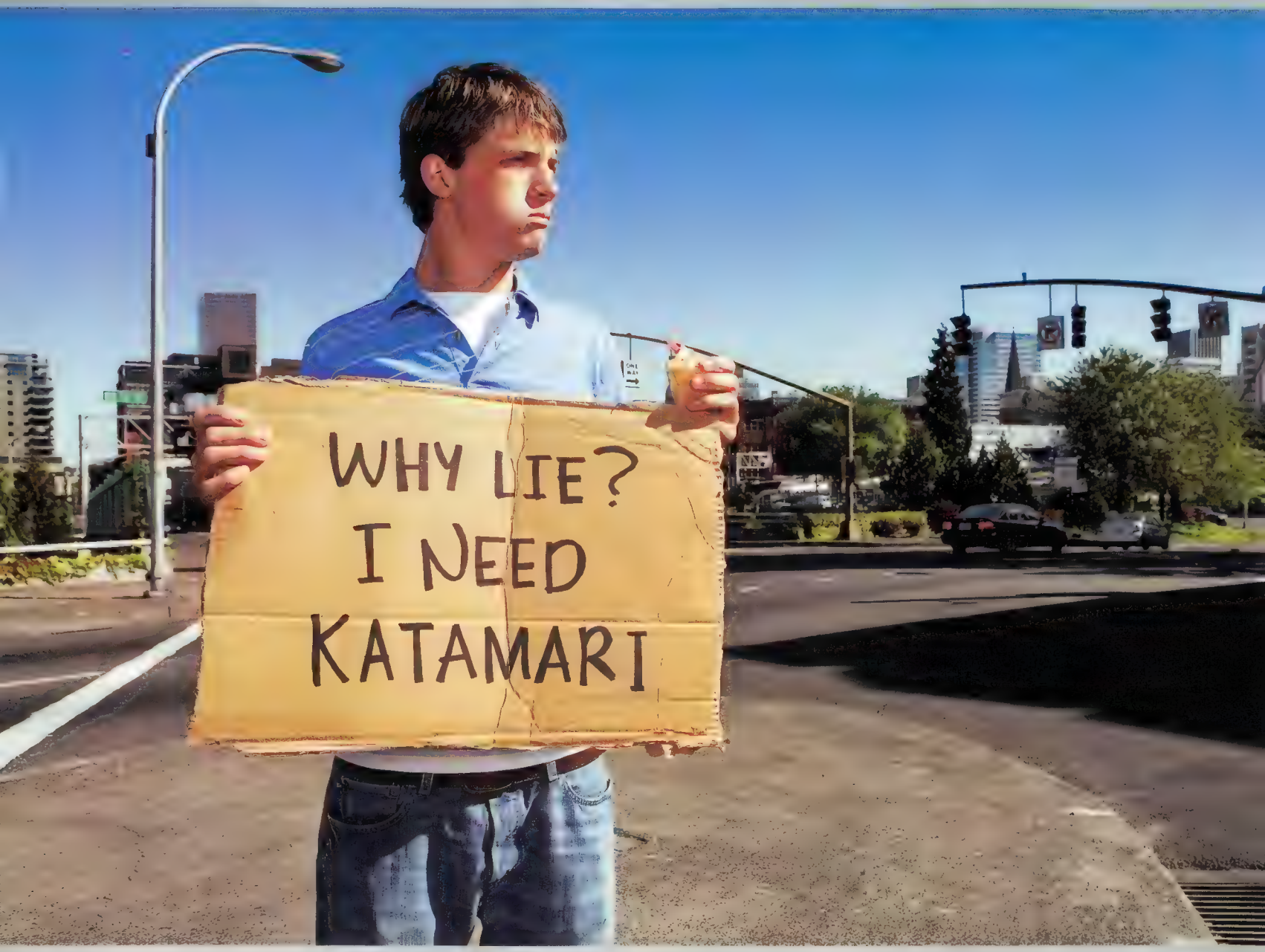

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play japan

This third incarnation of Play Japan sees us getting closer to our goal of a mini-Play focusing entirely on the Japanese entertainment market. Since so much of Play is already in drooling love with the country, how will we differentiate ourselves from the main content? A tough question, and one we found ourselves struggling with as we assembled the issue. To this end, we've laid down a simple ground rule and will (generally) stick to it in issues to come: The products we cover must not have an announced American release date. This month we review Square-Enix's Code Age Commanders and Nintendo's Jump Superstars, neither of which are likely to be released in America, and preview Production I.G's BLOOD+ (which will almost certainly become available in English but has yet to receive any official announcement). News will be frankly cultish and probably not quite fit for Ink, and Rewind Japan will feature retro games only ever released in Japan. Our goal is to create a section that will be entertaining to read even if you never get to play/watch/read/listen to the media featured. Play Japan is a work in progress — don't hesitate to let us know what you think.

< **Nick Des Barres**

Nick finds himself steadily acclimating to life in Japan, finding it not all that different from America, except that everyone speaks Japanese. And it's really tough to find a good pizza. Sure, he may be living in a land hypersaturated with every otaku fabulosity imaginable, but he just wants a goshdarn cheese pizza. No, he does not want corn. No, he does not want mayonnaise. No, he does not want squid ink, latticed pie crust, asparagus, spicy cod roe, or kimchi. He. Wants. A. Cheese. Pizza. Japan is stereotypically known for appropriating other countries' inventions and polishing them to a fine sheen (witness video games, for instance), but clearly pizza is the exception that (dis?)proves the rule. *Rue* the day you meet up with one of these Japanese devil pies.

Favorite genres: RPGs, Action, Adventure, Fighting, Shooters
Now playing: Wander and the Colossi (Shadow of the Colossus), Code Age Commanders
Favorite power-up: Chicken (Final Fight)

< **Dai Kohama**

Lately Dai has been obsessed with Tomy's new toy line, ".S" (pronounced "dots"). They're nothing more than 16x16 grids with slots to drop in "pixels", the purpose being to recreate your favorite Famicom-era three-color sprites. Playing with these endlessly fascinating .S has rekindled Dai's life-long love affair with 2-D pixel art, and he feels that the artistry inherent in magically conjuring up pictures from colored squares can go far beyond anything done in three dimensions. He prays fervently that game companies continue to produce hand-drawn works. Go sprites go!

Favorite genres: Action, Shooters, Other
Now playing: Super Princess Peach, Hayarigami Revenge
Favorite power-up: Zoanthrope transformation (Bloody Roar series)

NEWS

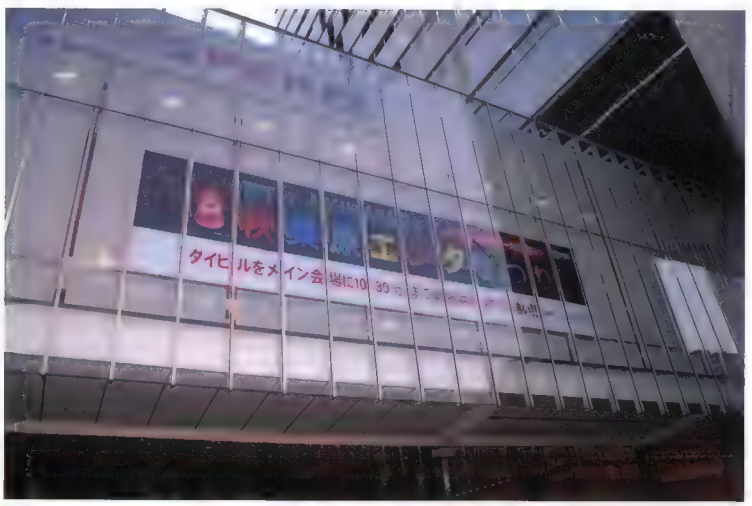
GungHo Attempts To Acquire GameArts

Japanese online gaming giant GungHo, a subsidiary of SoftBank, is currently in the process of attempting to acquire a controlling stake of storied developer GameArts (Silpheed, Lunar, Grandia). Currently owning 11.93% of the company, GungHo will have to gain at least 51% stock by buying out current owners such as GameArts founder Yoichi Miyaji, Square-Enix, and Connect Technologies. Industry analysts expect the deal to go through. So what will this mean for GameArts? Will they be forced to create endless MMORPGs, such as GungHo's recently-announced Grandia Online? Is Lunar 3 doomed forever? Do we sense mass staff walkouts? Stay tuned.

NEWS

T!FF Akihabara Entertainment Festival

Another only-in-Japan, only-in-Akihabara moment: the T!FF (Tokyo International Film Festival) Akihabara Entertainment Festival. A weeklong event held from October 22nd to the 30th, the festival allows the man on the street to play games like Kingdom Hearts II, Dirge of Cerberus, and Rogue Galaxy before release, witness the might of PS3 firsthand, and attend various panels and stage events. The highlight of the festival was undoubtedly the Neon Genesis Evangelion 10th Anniversary panel, with Megumi Hayashibara (Rei), Kotono Mitsuishi (Misato), and Yuko Miyamura (Asuka) in attendance. And wouldn't you know it, Play didn't get to go because of deadlines. Ugh!



Code Age Commanders

Square actually makes a new game

Whiz! Bang! Heroic Combos are visually stunning, but steadily grow to be tiresome.

When was the last time Square made a completely original game? Wasn't it, like, ten years ago? I recall fondly the company's Super Famicom renaissance during the mid-90s, when Square released a seemingly-endless stream of gobsmackingly-great original titles: Seiken Densetsu, Chrono Trigger, Front Mission, Bahamut Lagoon, Treasure of Rudra. Ever since Final Fantasy VII, however — marking the turning point between old Square and new Square — the company has chosen to concentrate almost exclusively on its franchises, making predictable and safe choices, eschewing innovation for reliability. Even Kingdom Hearts, however fantabulous it may be, is based on a license.

But just when I thought it would be nothing but Final Fantasy forever, Square's finally come up with an entirely new product. Though cynics may note Code Age is not a single game, but rather a "New Concept Brand" spanning across PS2, cellphones and manga, any risk taken by Square is welcome.

The PS2 iteration of the Code Age series is the brainchild of longtime Final Fantasy series art director Yusuke Naora, who's finally been let free to get his freak on unhindered by the shackles of a franchise. Though clearly informed by sources like Ryu Fujisaki's manga Waqwaq, Code Age's not-quite-organic, not-quite-machine design aesthetic is definitely its strongest point. Leaving its faults aside (addressed below), I can say with confidence I've never seen a world like this in a video game. Luckily it has an intriguing story to match, pretty much the only reason I kept playing when it became apparent CAC would be the exact same game from start to finish, with little variety between the four playable characters.

On an unspecified planet in the distant future, mankind has reached the highest echelons of civilization. In the sky hangs a gigantic, mysterious and imponderable artifact known as Central Code, the "linchpin of all creation". It becomes apparent to a Professor Alvin that Central Code is responsible for a phenomenon known as "Re-Born", a process occurring on a fixed schedule every several thousand years which destroys all life on the planet and returns it to a pre-evolutionary state. Re-Born is essentially a reset switch for the entire world, and the next one is looming on the horizon. Rather than face extinction, Alvin rallies to build an Ark attached to Central Code itself, theorizing that since Central Code is not effected by Re-Born, perhaps humanity can escape its inevitable fate by entering cold-sleep and waiting out the cataclysmic destruction.

But something goes wrong. Hundreds of years after all of mankind enters stasis,

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ART CONCEPT: YUSUKE NAORA / CHARACTER DESIGN: TOSHIYUKI ITAHANA

Central Code mysteriously explodes, sending the Ark plummeting to Earth. This is where the game begins, when you take control of Professor Alvin's son, a youth named Gene, who finds himself waking up amidst a ravaged world populated by bizarre black-and-white creatures known as the Otero, and roughly humanoid beings called the Coded. It's not only this new world that's unfamiliar to him, but also his own body: He has become contaminated with Otero, transforming him into an entirely new life-form, a Warhead, capable of altering the genetic structure of his limbs with but a thought.

A very interesting setup indeed, and one perhaps more suited for an RPG rather than an action game. Despite Square's protests to the contrary (labelling Code Age Commanders as a "Battle Action RPG"), it most definitely is not. Code Age is an action game through and through, with Unlimited Saga-esque flashback scenes added to flesh out the story. In terms of gameplay Code Age most resembles Square's own Kingdom Hearts, if you can imagine that game with non-stop battles and no jump button. Unlike Kingdom Hearts' free-roaming world, however, CAC is set up as a linear stage-clear type action game. Initially taking control of Gene (three other characters become available sequentially after completing Gene's scenario), your primary attacks are centered around alternate tapping of buttons assigned to his left and right arms, which transform into various clubbing, slashing, and stabbing short-range weapons. Long-range attacks are provided by the unique Otero Shot system — the cute little buggers populate every stage in swarms, and you can absorb them into your body, unleashing them at any time to produce effects as varied as projectile attacks and healing abilities. Gene's arms will continue to evolve into ever-more improbable forms during the game, provided you perform "Heroic Combos" over...and over...and over. First dizzying an enemy fighting-game style, you unleash the attack with the Triangle button, which calls up a gauge recalling the Shadow Hearts series' Judgment Ring System. By pressing an attack button when the gauge lines up precisely, Gene unleashes a visually spectacular and entirely non-interactive attack, depleting a massive amount of the enemy's health and inching him ever-closer to the next arm evolution. Occasionally an enemy will resist your combo, bringing up yet another gauge to be pressed in the exact same way. Clearing a stage nets you a rating based on how well you performed, rewarding you with "CP Points" that can be spent on character upgrades like extra health, extra chances if you die, and different types of shots.

And that's it. An intriguing enough game system, to be sure, but it never changes, and remains the same for all playable characters. In particular the Heroic Combos are grueling, with nary a variance in timing, and you may find yourself watching the same FMV-like combo sequence thirty times or more before your arms evolve. Indeed, Code Age is defined by repetition. Stages may have nominally different goals, but you still find yourself fighting the same black and white Coded over and over again, performing the same old combos. All four characters control exactly alike save for a single unique attack which is fairly useless. It may be repetitive in the extreme, but that doesn't mean it's not fun. If you can sort of tune out and enjoy it on a Final Fight level, you'll probably find yourself well rewarded. For most people, though, the main impetus to keep playing will probably be the story, and thankfully, it delivers. You'll find yourself genuinely interested in what happens next, as well as the gradually-unfolding history of this distinct and lovingly-detailed world. Somewhat sadly, should you make it all the way to the end with the final character, Haze, you'll find yourself with a whole lot of nothing in the way of bonus features. Sure, there's a forgettable mini-game featuring the Otero and a sound test, but surely a hidden character couldn't have hurt? Or perhaps a battle mode allowing you to play the normally CPU-controlled partner characters?

On the presentation front, graphics and sound have a familiar Square sheen, and are essentially unassailable, if not exactly jaw-dropping. I'd really expect no less from a developer as technically distinguished as Square, especially this late in the PS2's life-cycle. If truth be told I actually expected a bit more, as character animation can get a bit clunky, especially in cut-scenes, with characters displaying little or no emotion. Music fares better, with Final Fantasy XI's Kumi Tanioka providing eminently listenable synthchestral beats referencing soundtracks as far-flung as The Matrix trilogy and Panzer Dragoon.

Upon reflection, it's probably not that surprising Code Age Commanders isn't slated for a US release. It would be well-nigh impossible to implement the tie-in cellphone RPG Code Age Brawls in the West, not to mention find a publisher for the manga and orchestrating a simultaneous release. If the character and world designs intrigue you, by all means pick up the import, as Code Age Commanders has a triple-A story to tell. Just don't expect a triple-A game to come along for the ride. **Nick DesBarres**

"Code Age is an action game through and through, with Unlimited Saga-esque flashback scenes added to flesh out the story."

Other Codes

Completing the cutely-initialled CAA-CAB-CAC Code Age triumverate in Japan are Code Age Brawls, a fully 3-D online RPG for cellphones, and the currently-running manga Code Age Archives, by newcomer Aiyah-Ball. All three works take place during the same time period, and all shed light on various aspects of the Code Age world's intricate backstory. Unfortunately, the difficulty of implementing such a three-pronged scheme in America will probably mean Code Age is never released outside Japan.

Code Age Commanders 7.5

PlayStation 2

Fantastic design, excellent story

Repetitive gameplay

Developer: Square **Publisher:** Square-Enix **Online:** None

Available: Now (Japan)

GAME REVIEW

Jump Super Stars

The ultimate dream match?

There's a phenomenon almost every male student experiences in Japan: Weekly magazine duty. To briefly explain, certain students are charged with the task of buying popular magazines and bringing them to school, where they circulate through the class and eventually make their way back to the original owner. Even though entry forms for contests are frequently pillaged and sealed contents ripped open, this hallowed tradition continues to the present day.

When I was a wee lad in Sendai, Miyagi prefecture, the main magazine doing weekly rounds was Shonen Jump, birthplace of Goku, Kenshiro, and Naruto. Jump Super Stars is the first video game since 1993's Cult Jump on GameBoy to feature multiple Jump characters in a single game, and it's the first action game ever, so naturally the prospect got me excited.

The game itself at first appears to be a standard side-view, multi-player, multi-tier fighting game along the lines of Super Smash Bros., but with one only-possible-on-DS difference: The "Manga Deck Make System."

The smallest frames, for support characters, are a single square in size. Those over four are selectable player characters.

By arranging a total of over 650 manga frames from 27 past and current Jump manga series on the bottom touch screen, you can swap characters in and out, produce various special effects, heal yourself, etc. During battles, individual frames are selected with a judicious jab of the thumb.

A very interesting and original system, unfortunately married to a very boring game. The one-player experience consists of travelling across four RPG-style overhead maps, fighting battles and collecting frames as you go. Developers Ganbarion try to keep the proceedings interesting by adding clear conditions like "Break all the walls!", "Pick up all the fruit!", "Don't get hit!", etc. Things start getting crazy if you want to get every frame available in a stage, with conditions layered on top of each other—"Break all the walls" with "Finish the stage in 30 seconds or less" and "Use your special attack 20 times," all at the same time.

Clearing stages nets you Dialogue Frames and Character Frames, which have to be combined jigsaw-puzzle style in deck edit mode to create usable frames. The system is unique and allows for massive customization opportunities, with hidden effects becoming available by placing certain frames next to each other. Sadly, the process of building your "Manga Deck" is a tedious one, slogging through stage after stage of endlessly repetitive fights.

I don't want to make it sound all bad, though; the game does actually have a lot going for it. There's an ungodly amount of playable characters (nearly 40, including a final hidden character which requires download of a special frame at participating retailers), along with approximately 110 more who act as support characters. Nobody can deny this game has replay value, and collecting frames can get a bit addictive. Just viewing the animation of your favorite characters is fun; the developers were clearly in love with every series appearing in this game, with plenty of fan service on display.

And yet, the bad nearly outweighs the good. If you're not ultrafamilar with every single series featured in the game, putting together the dialogue and character frames can be a pain. Even I, who would certainly not classify as a casual Jump reader, had trouble assembling everything. Another massive issue is the (lack of) balance -- popular characters from currently-running series are vastly overpowered. Even if this is meant to be some sort of skewed fan service, it's no excuse for destroying proper game balance. The CPU characters are also complete idiots, with easily identifiable patterns: some stages can be beaten just by mashing on the attack buttons.

In short, Jump Super Stars is almost trying too hard. The game system is actually quite brilliant, but there's no denying the conspicuous rough edges. I truly hope Ganbarion has more time to refine and polish for the inevitable sequel, and despite a harsh review I look forward to it. I'm a member of the Jump Generation, after all. (Note however that my weekly magazine duty wasn't Jump. It was Famitsu.) **Dai Kohama**

Jump Super Stars — 6.5

Vast selection of playable characters, huge replay value

Terrible game balance, idiotic CPU characters

Developer: Ganbarion **Publisher:** Nintendo **Online:** None
Available: Now (Japan)

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BLOOD+

BLOOD like you don't remember it

About two years ago, I used to live right next to Asakusa Station, the final stop on the Toei-Asakusa Line. That's right: The location where BLOOD: The Last Vampire opens. Whenever I had chance to ride the line, I'd stop and think, "Oh yeah, this is where Saya got off the train", or "Here's where Saya and David had their dialogue". It may be a bit sad, but that's how much I love the original BLOOD.

So it's with somewhat mixed feelings I approach the latest entry in Production I.G's girl-with-sword-kills-vampires saga, BLOOD+, this time taking the form of a television series. Other than the basic concept — a girl named Saya hunts down "Chiropterans" with a katana — this is a totally different BLOOD. How different? A single glance at the new character designs reveals the answer: *Utterly* different. While the original BLOOD had strikingly original character designs by illustrator Katsuya Terada, this new television version takes a much safer approach, with a more conventional anime look.

This somewhat bland aesthetic is surprising given the eclectic staff. BLOOD+ represents the directorial debut of longtime Production I.G member Junichi Fujisaku (responsible for the smash-hit YaruDora series of fully-animated adventure games on PlayStation and PSP, as well as countless I.G scripts and official novelizations), with character designs by newcomer mangaka Chizu Hashii, mechanical designs by Kenji Teraoka, and production by Jun Matsumoto. The latter two you may be familiar with from their work on Ghost in the Shell: Stand Alone Complex and SAC 2nd Gig. Most surprising, however, is the music staff, with production by Hans Zimmer (!) and composition by reliable Hollywood tunesmith Mark Mancina (Speed, The Lion King, Training Day).

Like the original BLOOD, BLOOD+ is designed as a multimedia project, with no less than three manga series running in conjunction with the television version. Two are side stories, and one is a direct adaptation. Other projects, such as a video game, seem sure to follow.

So what's it all about? Does BLOOD+ have any tangible connection to BLOOD: The Last Vampire? At first glance, it would seem not: The story takes place in the present day, in Okinawa — nearly 40 years removed from The Last Vampire. This series' Saya is a bubbly high-school student living peacefully with her adopted family. She seems to have it all — everything, that is, but her memory, which she lost a year ago. Her happy existence, however, is about to come to an abrupt end, when she meets a mysterious cello player clad in black clothes known only as Hagi (soft "G"). When this enigmatic young man, who seems to know Saya from before her amnesia, hands her an oddly-shaped Japanese sword, history will begin a new course. Will Saya be able to regain her lost memories, and reclaim her own existence?

The look and lighter tone of BLOOD+ may come as a shock to the longtime BLOOD fan, but let's face it, has Production I.G *ever* done a bad TV series? I certainly can't think of one, and it looks like I'll be spending my Saturdays at 6PM (when BLOOD+ airs in Japan) in front of the television for quite a while.

Dai Kohama

"The look and lighter tone of BLOOD+ may come as a shock to the longtime BLOOD fan, but let's face it, has Production I.G ever done a bad TV series?"

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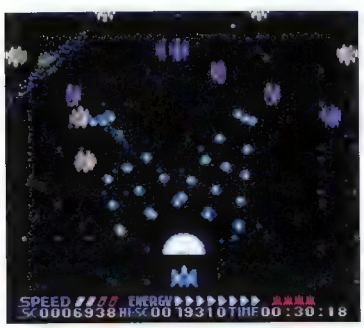
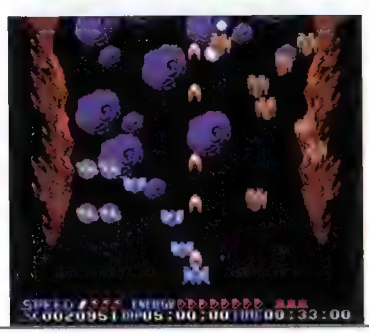
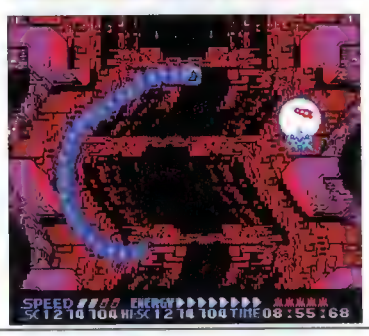
Recca: Summer Carnival '92

This game should not exist







I first encountered this game in college, long after it had been released. It was an otherwise unremarkable morning at design school. Suddenly one of my classmates, a fellow who lived for retro games, burst into the lab with a wild-eyed glare, brandishing a Famicom cartridge.

"Kohama-kun! Dude! This is supposed to be insane, we gotta check it out!"

As luck —or fate— would have it, we had found a cast-off Famicom and television in the trash just the day before, and we wasted no time hooking them up. It was then that we witnessed the impossible—Recca: Summer Carnival '92.

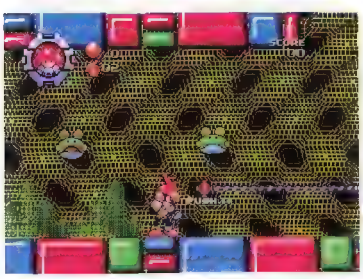
I'll just come right out and say it: This is not a Famicom game. It exists divorced of hardware, programmed in some unfathomable distant dimension. Put simply it's a miracle. For anyone familiar with the hardware, the game always elicits one of two reactions:a gape of utter shock, or nervous laughter. Fairly predictable human reactions when we are confronted with that which we cannot possibly comprehend.

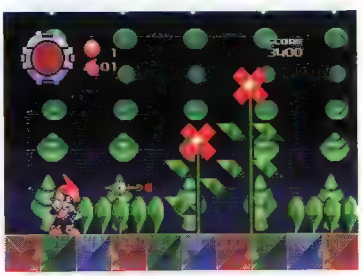
Widely regarded as one of, if not *the*, most technically advanced Famicom games of all time (not surprising given its release a full nine years after the system launch), the majesty of Naxat's Recca cannot be accurately explained with text or still pictures. You have to see it in motion. Impossibly high-speed scrolling, simply irrational amounts of bullets on-screen, crazy line-scrolling and raster effects, Mega Drive-style multi-segmented bosses, and a thumping Yuzo Koshiro-esque techno soundtrack all combine to overwhelm. The difficulty level is also masterful —extremely difficult, but not impossible.

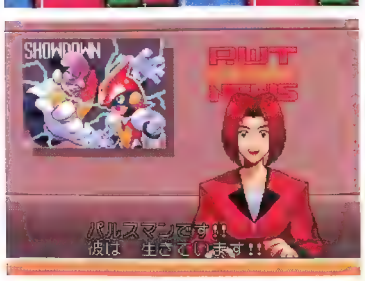
I was reminded of this game by last month's release of the soundtrack on CD, thirteen years after the game itself. Might this presage a revival of Naxat's Summer Carnival series of shooters, dormant since 1994? We can only pray. In the meantime, anyone serious about shooters owes it to themselves to seek this 8-bit miracle out. **Dai Kohama**

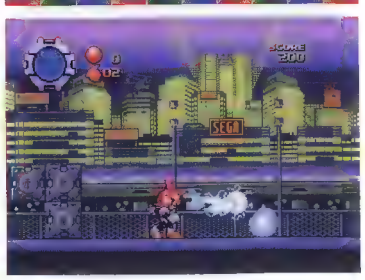
Pulseman

Happy computer colors!









Let's indulge in a moment of historical speculation. What if Pokémon never happened to Game Freak, creators of masterful action games like Quinty (Mendel Palace), Jerry Boy (Smart Ball) and Magical Taruruto-Kun? The answer is probably more immensely playable, rock-solid platforming along the lines of Pulseman. Unfortunately released mere months before the debut of the Saturn (not to mention saddled with an ignominious name-change from the original title, Spark, after conflict with Konami's Sparkster), and never afforded a release outside Japan, Pulseman has regrettably been buried by the sands of time.

While the game itself is probably best described as a cross between Mega Man (electronic boy hero, nonlinear selectable stages) and Sonic (a game engine emphasizing run-to-the-right speed), Pulseman features one memorable gameplay innovation in the form of the "Volteccer" (later recycled as the name one of Pikachu's moves in the Japanese version of Pokémon), a move that allows Pulseman to convert himself into pure electricity, ride on wires, and go ricocheting about the levels like a supersonic pachinko ball.

However, the area Pulseman really shines in is its design. Sporting immediately likable character designs by Ken Sugimori (who would go on to capture children's hearts the world over with his creation of Ash and Pikachu) and absolutely psychedelic stage designs full of color-cycling, line-scrolling, wire-frame derangement, Pulseman is an easy contender for the most visually-arresting game ever seen on the Mega Drive. Parallax is also put to novel use, sometimes scrolling in the *opposite* direction of character movement, creating a slightly alien an unnerving effect—this is definitely not a game for the epileptic. The music is also notable, representing the quintessence of 90s Japanese synthpop video game sound.

While it's certainly a shame Pulseman was never released in the west, there may be light at the end of the tunnel. Game Freak's first action platformer in over a decade, Drill Dozer on GBA, should be available by the time you read this. After ten years of endless Pokémon games, let's hope they still have the knack. **Nick Des Barres**

Masayo Maruyama

Certifiably Ingenious

words jim dewey

Masayo Mauryama's work with legendary production studio Madhouse goes back further than most anime fans have been alive, and there's at least one or two titles that you've heard of that he's been behind, producing. Here, he lets us in on what it's like to work with some of Japan's most revered anime directors, and lets a few cats out of their bags on a few upcoming projects.

Madhouse Production was created in 1972, which you co-created, and has especially grown in production over the past ten years... what do you attribute the longevity of the studio to?
Fortunately, we've had directors capable of leadership, especially recently with using outside directors like Yoshiaki Kawajiri.

What about manga legend Tezuka Osamu's work with *Unico* and *Metropolis*?
Unico was always something I wanted to work on, so I talked to Tezuka and got the rights—he had a lot of demands to make for the film—but I virtually ignored all of it. In retrospect, I do have some regrets that I should have been more accommodating to him back then, but he knew I wasn't going to be the type to listen, and I'm grateful he gave me the leeway to work on it the way I wanted to.

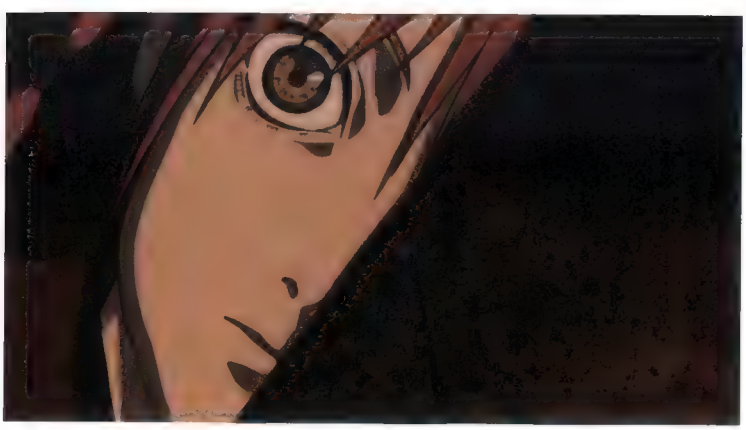
Any memories of Osamu?
He was a very light sleeper, only a couple hours a day, and back then when I was young, I had my apartment near the studio. He'd ride his bike from the studio to my apartment at three in the morning saying, "C'mon, get up, get to work!" He was a superman, but I'm a mortal human being.

What show for you has gone underappreciated that you really loved?
I'd say every title I've worked on has gone underappreciated—they all deserve a bigger break. (laughs) A few examples though would be *Phoenix: Chapter of Ho-o* by director Rintaro, and *A Wind Named Amnesia*. They're precious gems in the library of Madhouse.

As the studio embraces newer technologies with animation, what makes the quality different than with the hand-drawn element?
I think there's a lot that's been lost with digital production—you can see your results immediately, less room for experimentation. With cels, you had to be more bold in your experimentation. I worry that digital animation is reducing the ability of vision in animators and directors alike. Hand-drawn allows the style and emotion of the line to carry over to the cels.

Has there been a project that you were just happy was over, or just turned into a nightmare to finish?
Oh, that would be each and every one of them! (laughs) Most works when I'm done, I wish I could do over and start again from scratch.

What does Madhouse have next coming up?
Director Rintaro has a bold CG feature he's working on, Kawajiri is working on the *Highlander* feature film set for next year, and Satoshi Kon is working on next Spring's release of *Paprika*. *Full Metal Alchemist*'s director, Mizushima, is joining with us on a new title, and the *Trigun* revival is underway with a feature film in production which is two to three years in the making.

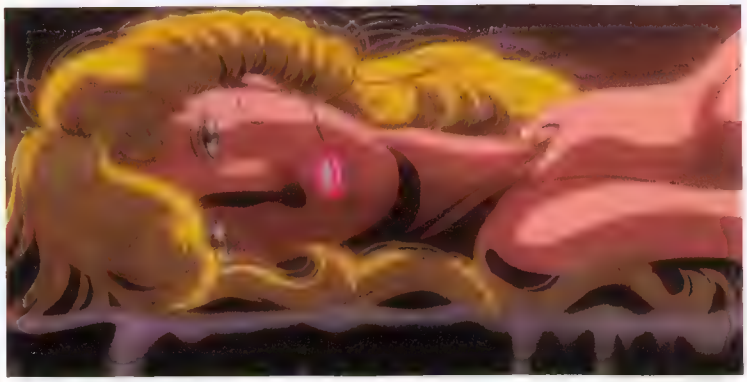


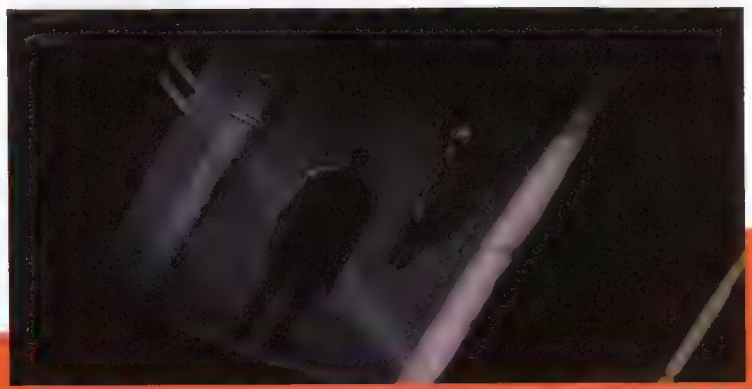
Finally, what's it like to work with (*Tokyo Godfathers*) director Satoshi Kon for such a length of time?
Satoshi is very fond of alcohol, he drinks pretty much all day, but very professional once he comes to work; very intense concentration. He's also the tallest man at Madhouse; in contrast, I'm the smallest.
In all fairness, I'd say given your history in animation, you're one of the tallest men there.
Well, the oldest, certainly. (laughs)

> "I think there's a lot that's been lost with digital production."

The Professional
Golgo 13

Number one with both his guns





"Duke Togo, a.k.a. Golgo-13, does two things: kills folks and beds down anything with double-Ds."

It's always nice to see a classic reemerge on DVD, especially when it's one as un-PC as *Golgo 13*. Far as I can tell, Duke Togo, a.k.a. Golgo-13, does two things: kills folks and beds down anything with double-Ds. And since he's the Duke all he has to do is lay there and soak in the view. When it comes to contract killing though, there's nothing Duke can't do. No matter what agency is onto him or what they do to stop him, by the time they figure out what hit 'em, he's in bed with their daughter, although this time out he actually almost bites off more than he can chew. Taking out the son of the world's largest oil baron, Leonard Dawson, has major ramifications. So connected is he that he calls in the CIA, FBI, and the U.S. Military and a couple of psycho killing machines so vile and immoral that they're even over the top by anime standards. Duke's only hope is going straight into the belly of the beast, which he does, and it's never been so fun to watch. Outside of being a smooth bit of super-caper action, *The Professional* is one slick piece of traditional animation.

Way before its time when it originally aired in 1992 (it was also the first anime ever to incorporate CG, albeit archaic by today's standards), it's still the picture of awesome technique and slick editing, as well as a landmark film on the road to Western-tinged anime. Don't miss the interview with Producer Mata Yamamoto—a short but fascinating look back at what finally compelled him to peel Duke off the pages of Japanese manga and bring him to animated life. Dave Halverson

Golgo 13 — **8.5**

Movie

Nothing like a good bloody sex filled old-school hit of contract killing.

Duke needs to work on his foreplay skills and maybe brush up on the old stealth.

Released by: Urban Vision **Rating:** R
Running Time: 103 minutes **Available:** November

It's never a good idea to point your car at G-13.
You might get dead.

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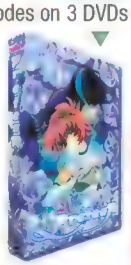

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Shadow Skill

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"A Sevalle's power lies in the words spoken. A pure martial language that maximizes her abilities and raises her metabolic rate"…sounds like just another battle cry to me, but hey, it seems to work okay for Elle Ragu, the 59th Sevalle, a.k.a. Shadow Skill—at least where winning tournaments is concerned. Her people skills on the other hand definitely need work. A Sevalle is an elite brand of martial artist who competes in gladiator-style arena battles for fortune and glory. Some are evil, some are mystics, and some, like Scarface—the spiritual leader of the breed—are both noble and lethal. Elle on the other hand has chosen a different path: that of a career slacker/alcoholic who wanders the countryside with her brother Gau (a wily level-headed Sevalle in training) and Folli (the trio's manager and powerful mystic) picking up cash and the odd feast by defending the downtrodden and winning tournaments. And it works pretty well too, if only Elle wouldn't spend every penny they earn getting liquored up. Sound familiar? Well, it should, because this one's a clone of a clone of a clone…and so on. …Orphen, Those Who Hunt Elves, Ruin Explorers, Saiyuki, Slayers, Sorcerer Hunters…wandering bands of misfits, making money by kicking butt and protecting the meek, are one of the most prolific plot-devices in all of anime. And that's not such a bad thing as long as you've got a good hook (which Shadow Skill seemingly does in the whole Savalle thing), a good script with plenty of character development, deception, and camp (also check), strong character design (can you say sunburst hair, acorn boobs, and hyper-exaggerated muscles?) and at least decent animation, which is where Shadow Skills' wheels begin to come off. This is one of those series like Orphen where the character designs actually change from scene to scene—where you might see a minute or so of good, quality animation (likely fighting) followed by filler in between. For what it's worth, the OVA wasn't much better, so between the two I'd have to recommend the series since it's also got the primo ADV dub happening. Let's just call Shadow Skill good, not-so-clean fun and leave it at that.

Dave Halverson

Shadow Skill 7.0

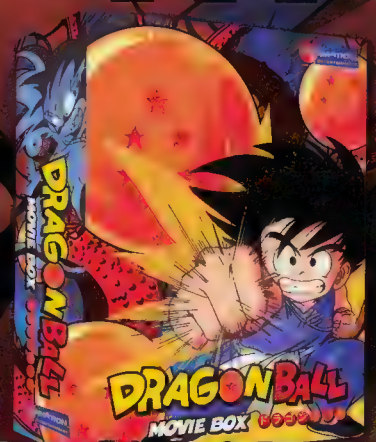
Fast-paced fighting fun, wicked character design and enough camp to pitch your tent.

Animation quality wavers like a flag in the breeze and it's a bit dated.

Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV-PG
Running Time: 100 minutes **Available:** November

"Elle on the other hand has chosen a different path: that of a career slacker/alcoholic…"

Give the Gift that HITS BACK



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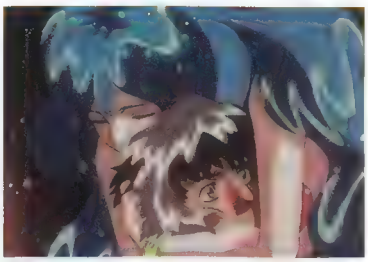
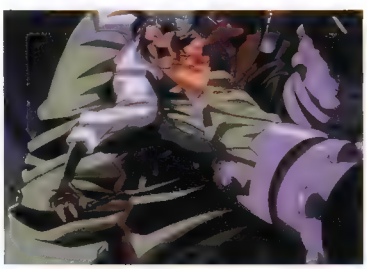
Moby Dick

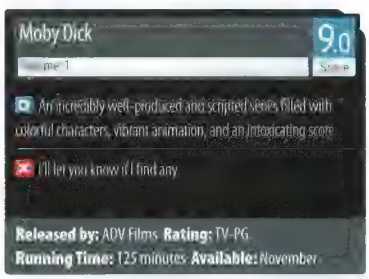


I know, I know...*Moby Dick*...the anime? But it's not what you're thinking...not by a long shot. Captain Ahab is indeed back and about to go after the mother of all whales but that is where the similarities end. This descendant of Ahab sails the seas of deep space in the year 4699, and the whales he hunts are actually discarded space ships from the "space bubble," an era when human technology and wealth were at their peak. So many ships were created during this time that when the bubble burst countless corporations were forced to cast their fleets adrift for reasons ranging from failed business plans to bankruptcy, and ever since jettisoning discarded ships into space has become a common practice. These massive ships may look harmful enough but up close and personal they're moving fast and are often rigged with elaborate defense mechanisms. That's where the whale hunters come in. But I digress. Before we get to all of that we meet the android, Dew, who after 3,750 days surveying the Planet Windmill is suddenly reassigned and ends up in the belly of *the* "whale," Moby Dick, where he is implanted with a device that "joins them as one" and then gets jettisoned into deep space. Meanwhile, after two months of hitchhiking the galaxy, a young adventurer with dreams of becoming a member of Ahab's crew, 13-year-old Lucky Luck, finally makes his way to King Kuron in the Nantucket Nebula—a floating space colony known as "the great space dump," abandoned by the public and now home to the miscreants of the galaxy, including, of course, the lord of all Space Whalers, Captain Ahab. Initially we come to know the crew of the Lady Whisker, Ahab himself (a compelling, engaging man if there ever was one) and follow Lucky as he goes through muster, but before Volume 1 is out an event will transpire that will spook the crew and especially Ahab like they've never been before.

"This descendant of Ahab sails the seas of deep space in the year 4699, and the whales he hunts are actually discarded space ships"



I love surprises like *Moby Dick*. This is an extremely well-produced series, filled with interesting camera work and a loose, fluid animation style that fills it with vibrancy. This is without a doubt the sleeper hit of 2005. Dave Halvereson


Moby Dick
9.0
An incredibly well-produced and scripted series filled with colorful characters, vibrant animation, and an intoxicating score
I'll let you know if I find any
Released by: ADV Films Rating: TV-PG
Running Time: 125 minutes Available: November

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anime on umd

Ghost in the Shell, Blood The Last Vampire, Ninja Scroll

Released by: Manga Entertainment

'Tis the season for anime on UMD and here are three of the best from Manga Video. The original, powerful *Ghost in the Shell*, the superbly animated horror masterpiece *Blood the Last Vampire*, and *Ninja Scroll* the original movie that launched its own movement.

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Anime Legends: S-CRY-ed

Released by: Bandai Entertainment
Rating: 13 + **Now Playing:** NA

2003 was an amazing year so we won't hold it against you if you missed *S-CRY-ed*, one of the most original Sci-Fi series to come along in a long while. Now available as an Anime Legend title, you can bite off 10-episode chunks at a time so bon-appetit.

Wild Arms Complete Collection Thin Pack

Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** xxxxx

If you like your video-game-based anime with punchy humor and an old-west flavor, ADV's *Wild Arms* thin pack is your poison: 22 episodes on 4 DVDs, it also makes a great gift for any RPG fan with lots of down time on his or her hands.

Genshiken

Released by: Anime Works
Rating: 16 + **Now Playing:** Volume 2 - "Model Citizens"

It's the Otaku show that Otakus love! Genshiken! Put your hands together for Volume 2 ladies and gentlegeeks, it's on sale now and, once again, has your number.

Avenger Complete Collection

Released by: Bandai Entertainment **Rating:** 13+

Do you like your delectable Sci-Fi series by the creators of *.hack//SIGN* in an embossed tin complete with all 13 episodes and 4 bonus Mini-Cells? We figured as much. This is anime done right in packaging thy shall covet.

Shura No Toki

Released by: Anime Works
Rating: 13+ **Now Playing:** Volume 4 - "Age of Chaos"

Two more volumes and one of the year's best martial arts extravaganzas is a wrap. As the revolution burns on, Izumi dares to go into battle with the greatest swordsman of his time in Mutsu Clan tradition using only his Enmei style . . . no weapons!

Full Metal Panic! Complete Collection Thin Pack

Released by: ADV Films **Rating:** TV PG

If you give or hope to get an anime box set this holiday season, *Full Metal Panic!* should be at the very top of your list. A must-have for anyone who hasn't seen it; this is the best combination of mecha-action, comedy, and high-school high-jinks ever put on DVD.

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the wonderful world of manga

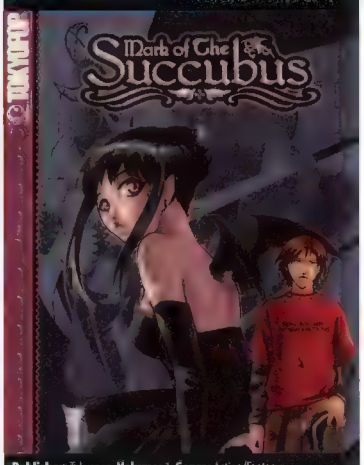
Genshiken

Publisher: Del Rey **Volume:** 3 **Genre:** Comedy
Rating: 16+ **Story and Art:** Kio Shimoku

Life in and around The Society for the Study of Modern Visual Culture continues to get weirder and weirder thanks in no small part to Kanji's little sister, Keiko (Kanji being the dough-head that started this mess in the first place), who will do anything to get her man, including *become* an otaku…As if that's possible. Too bad for her those who play porn games together stay together. From otaku at the beach to otaku on fire, Volume 3 covers all the bases. **DH**

Read it if: You wanna see where the real sitcom gold is buried.

Mark of the Succubus

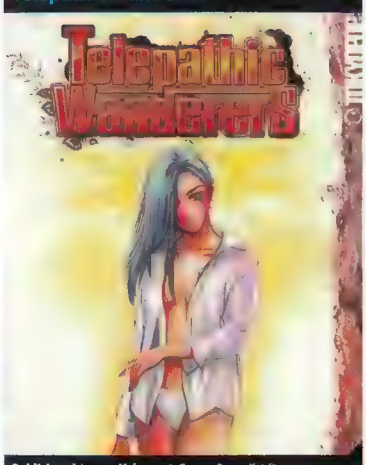


Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Fantasy
Rating: 13+ **Story:** Ashley Raite **Art:** Irene Flores

An intriguing bit of storytelling, about a succubus, Maeve, sent to the human world as a training ground/test for seducing and murdering humans; a rouse concealed by a necklace that conceals her true form (even if I do like it better). Why is it that whenever otherworldly travelers infiltrate our planet they always end up falling for us and breaking their sacred taboos? We're about to find out, again, and I like where this one is going. Too bad the cheap shading technique is such an eye sore **DH**

Read it if: You think the demons should win, because these ones are too cool for school.

Telepathic Wanderers



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Drama/Sci-Fi
Rating: 16+ **Story:** Yasutaka Isurugi **Art:** Sayaka Yamazaki

And now for something completely different…Telepathic rivets you to your chair before page 20 and then just when you think the raving psycho is going to rape and kill the gorgeous girl next door, she takes over his mind and utterly cracks it! Yeah! The next thing we know we're out of the prefecture and into a train car, where Nanase can hear what the men around her are thinking (imagine!). There she meets a telepathic little boy and a psychic who sees the last thing you want to see as a passenger. Check please! **DH**

Read it if: You've ever wondered what it must be like to know what people are thinking.

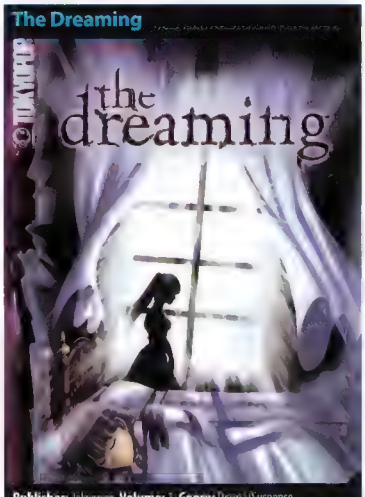
Sugar Sugar Rune

Publisher: Del Rey **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Fantasy/Comedy
Rating: 10+ **Story and Art:** Moyoco Anno

To determine which witch will become Queen of the Magic World, Chocolat and Vanilla must go to the human world where they will compete for…boys: All they have to do is utter an incantation and voilà, crystallized hearts in jewel-like form. Beam me up Mommy! If only it were so easy… Strange fact number 1: They're 10-human-years-old and enjoy hobbies such as collecting frogs, and baking. Strange fact number 2: I'm totally digging it. It's like Harry Potter on acid. Wonderfully illustrated; SSR is jam-packed with spooky fun and attitude to burn at the stake. **DH**

Read it if: You like sugar and spice and everything not nice.

The Dreaming

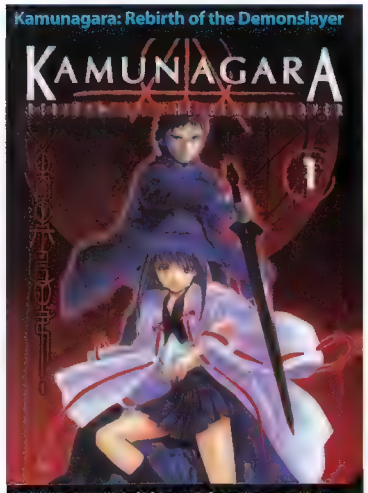


Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Drama/Suspense
Rating: 13+ **Story and Art:** Queenie Chan

Nothing like a private college buried in the Australian bush to ramp up the creepiness when twin sisters Amber and Jeane arrive for studies. It seems that from time to time young women wander off into the woods inexplicably, never to be found again. Naturally it seems silly at first to the girls, until strange phenomena, creepy dreams, and a curmudgeonly vice-principal with an axe in her office only add credence to the stories… Those who love ingenues in spooky situations will dig it-- twice as much with twins! **JD**

Read it if: Really, have you ever seen a creepy thing come out of Australia, besides Yahoo Serious?

Kamunagara: Rebirth of the Demonslayer



Publisher: Anime Works **Volume:** 1-3 **Genre:** Supernatural/Action
Rating: 16+ **Story and Art:** Hajime Yamamura

As if high school doesn't come with enough caveats, imagine if the apple of your eye turned out to be forbidden fruit. Perhaps the first words she spoke to him "careful there's a tempest coming" should have tipped him off as to what might follow. Ah, but lust, even more so than love is blind. I've just never seen it so bloody. Kugaya goes from reluctant student to animal killer to full blown demon slayer before the fifth act. Is she worth it? Is anyone? Too late to turn back now the "Intruders" are coming. **DH**

Read it if: You like your demon-slaying with extra sauce and a side of hotness.

Psy-Comm

Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Sci-Fi **Rating:** 13+
Story by: Jason Henderson and Tony Salvaggio **Art:** Shane Granger

If you think reality shows are cool, imagine, if you will, war as a televised event, staged and brought to you live from Electromedia, like Starship Troopers meets The Running Man, complete with big stars, ratings, the works. Towering holographic anchor people fill the city skies bringing you the latest conquest and a word from our sponsors…But all is not as it seems. Not by a long shot. Wait until you meet the Board of Directors. Someone needs to make this into a feature film. **DH**

Read it if: Ah heck, just read it. This one is too good to pass up. If you like your Sci-Fi make it a priority.

Devil May Cry 3

Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Fantasy
Rating: 16+ **Story and Art:** Suguro Chayamachi

How cool is Dante? He's eats cold pizza before breakfast, slays a demon or two by lunch and when confronted with common thugs simply slices their heads in half like cantaloupes. But even the son of Sparda isn't immune to the lure of money and 4-million dollars buys a lot of pizza and beer. Based on the events surrounding DMC 3, Dante takes on a case to find a missing girl, Alice, and finds himself face to face with Brother Virgil. With the return of the Demon King imminent the demon half-breeds have their own score to settle. **DH**

Read it if: You like the game, a straightforward demonic blood bath, or are curious about Dante's fascination with

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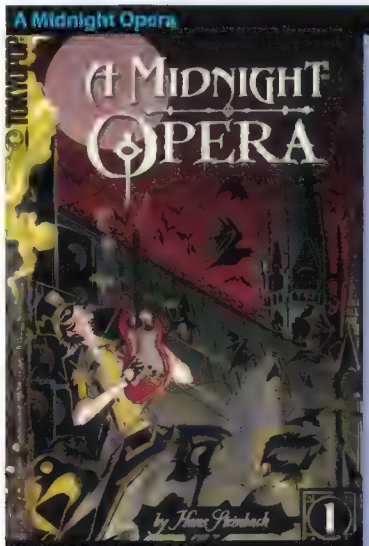
A Midnight Opera



Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Horror
Rating: 13+ **Story and Art by:** Hans Steinbach

If you combined the irreverent bliss of Underworld, Hellsing, and Queen of the Damned you might come close to A Midnight Opera; the narrative and key moments in the life of Ein DeLaLune, the lead singer and guitarist of a powerhouse Goth-metal band. He is a rockstar. He is undead. He is a werewolf. Lord Emperor Ferdinand gave the order to exterminate him, his brother, and their mother back in 1562 but he and brother Leroux escaped and began waging the war for their right to live amongst us. Seemingly victorious, Ein's cold heart finds love and so he chooses life; to run away with his mortal princess and leave the war behind…Not going to happen. With The Order (those crazy Catholics only with tech you wouldn't believe) on one side and Commander of the Undead (by way of Leroux), Witch Elizabeth Bathory, on the other, his ascension is put on permanent hold as one of the year's best manga gets underway. **DH**

Samurai Champloo

Publisher: Tokyopop **Volume:** 1 **Genre:** Action/Comedy
Rating: 13+ **Story and Art:** Masaru Gotsubo

Okay, so you can't hear the hip-hop soundtrack when you read it (but that's why man invented iPods), it's not animated, and there's no slick smarmy voices, but darned if it's still not one wickedly cool read. Samurai Jin and Mugen are like the split personalities of Cowboy Bebop's Spike Spiegel. Add in frustrated Fuu, the girl who keeps them together balancing their egos from clashing, and you've got the new cool. Art is tight like the show, and the cocky humor radiates from the page. **JD**

WHERE ARE MY CHAMPLINGS?
HEY!
YEAH, YEAH, CHEER AWAY.
SORRY TO KEEP YOU WAIT
YOU EXPECT ME TO DRINK SOMETHING THAT TASTES LIKE THIS?
WHO IS THIS?
WELCO-
JUST CUT YOUR LINE, FUU.

Read it if: It's an extension of the original series, the "untold tales". And it kicks butt.

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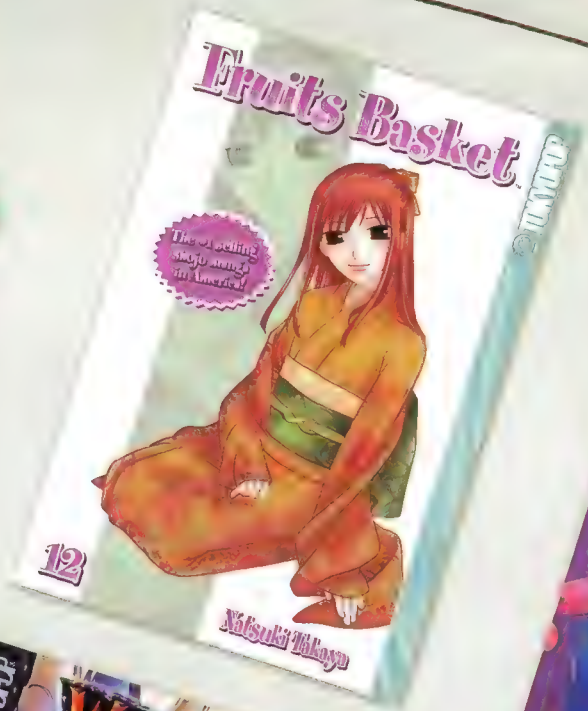

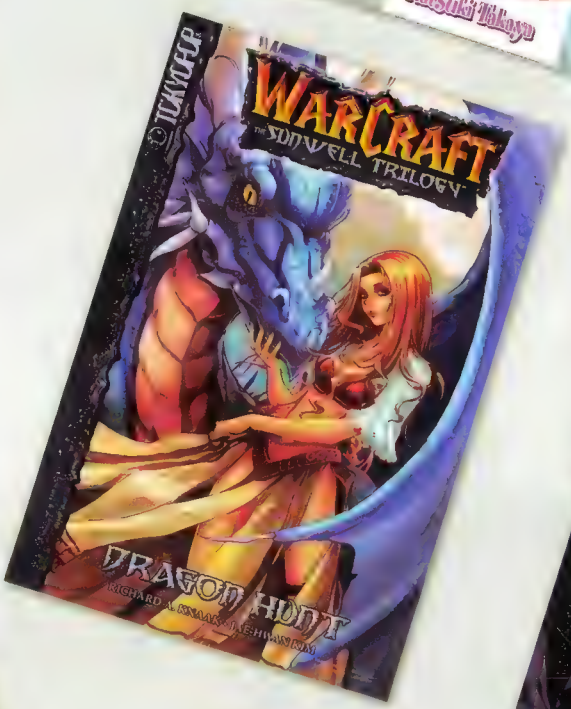

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02	**Samurai 7**	*funimation productions*
03	**Godannar**	*adv films*
04	**Cowboy Bebop Remix**	*bandai entertainment*
05	**Appleseed**	*geneon entertainment*
06	**Ghost Stories**	*adv films*
07	**Mars Daybreak**	*bandai entertainment*
08	**Gilgamesh**	*adv films*
09	**Gankutsuou**	*geneon entertainment*
10	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*

Play Magazine Top Ten

01	**Godannar**	*adv films*
02	**Ghost in the Shell SAC 2nd Gig**	*manga/bandai ent.*
03	**Moby Dick**	*adv films*
04	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
05	**Tenjho Tenge**	*geneon entertainment*
06	**Samurai Gun**	*adv films*
07	**Cowboy Bebop Remix**	*bandai entertainment*
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Gilgamesh
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Street Fighter Alpha Generations
manga entertainment

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Dave Halverson

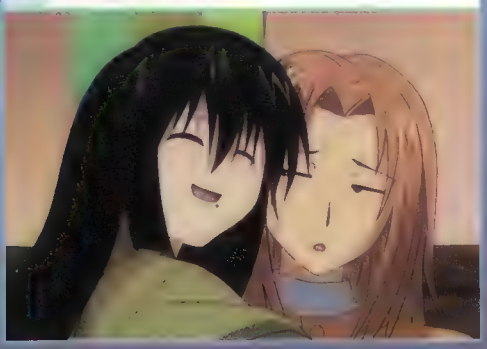
01	**Goddanar**	*adv films*
02	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
03	**Gilgamesh**	*adv films*
04	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Tenjho Tenge**	*geneon entertainment*

Jim Dewey

01	**My Neighbor Totoro**	*buena vista home entertainment*
02	**Panda Z**	*bandai entertainment*
03	**Cowboy Bebop Remix**	*bandai entertainment*
04	**Gankutsuou**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Gunslinger Girl**	*funimation productions*

Nelson Lu

01	**Genshiken**	*anime works*
02	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
03	**Goddanar**	*adv films*
04	**Jubei Chan 2**	*geneon entertainment*
05	**Elfen Lied**	*adv films*



Readers' Anime Top Five

01	**Samurai Champloo**	*geneon entertainment*
02	**Ghost in the Shell: SAC 2nd Gig**	*manga ent.*
03	**Burst Angel**	*funimation productions*
04	**Godannar**	*adv films*
05	**Genshiken**	*anime works*

Play Magazine Manga Top Five

01	**A Midnight Opera**	*tokyopop manga*
02	**Samurai Champloo**	*tokyopop manga*
03	**Genshiken**	*del rey*
04	**Psy-Comm**	*tokyopop manga*
05	**Kamunagara**	*anime works*

Readers' Most Wanted

01	**Street Fighter Alpha Generations**	*manga ent.*
02	**Godannar**	*adv films*
03	**One Piece**	*toei*
04	**Howl's Floating Castle**	*miramax*
05	**Golgo 13**	*urban vision*

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Here you are, transitioning from *Barbershop* and *Taxi*, working with tons of effects, action, explosions, blue screens... Little bit more difficult?
Tim Story: Oh, man [laughs]. Where do we begin. One hundred percent, totally different. It was to the point where you almost had to start over again. I knew from the start I was brought in to do character and story. I was told very early on that when it came to action and effects, I was going to be helped. But at the same time, when you go into a big project like this that's nothing like you've ever done, you still want to know how you make the special effects and the action help you tell the story, help you with the characters. But it's all just daunting. It was pretty scary in the first realm of it, but that's what I loved about it: challenging myself and kind of going for it. You have to tighten your seatbelt and learn as you go.

Even more challenging is dealing with the fickle fans you have with the source material.
Oh yeah [laughs]. You really have to respect the fact it's their baby, you've been handed the keys to their car. They want you to drive it well. I just kind of looked at it like, look, I'm not going to be able to please everybody, there's no way I can do it. So what I had to do was just hunker down and say, as long as I capture the spirit of the movie, I'll be fine. Because at the end of the day, look at *Spider-Man*, they went crazy that he didn't have web shooters. They went crazy off Wolverine being six-feet-tall as opposed to being five-foot-two. I just knew, you're never gonna be able to please people 100 percent, so you just kind of have to capture the right spirit and make the best movie you can given the circumstances.

You decided to take a light, fun approach to the film. I liked that aspect.
Thank you so much. At the end of the day, that's what we wanted to do. Although I love the movies like *Batman* and *X-Men*, this wasn't a dark movie. These are one of the few comic-book characters where you can actually have that much fun and not have it be out of place. So we just made it a point to have fun with it.

Yeah, and I think it's unfair when people get worked up because a stylistic choice is made. I did love *Batman Begins*...
Yeah, it was such a great movie.

And I just saw it again last night, the DVD just came out...
Same here.

And a friend and I were debating, he wants the humor taken out of comic-book movies and have them all dark and brooding for effect. But it just wouldn't have really made sense to take *Fantastic 4* in that direction. That's not the film you made.
Yeah, and it's interesting, it was such a hard balance, because at the same time you have to have the fun these characters have in the comic books, you've also got to respect the genre you're in, people expect the action and the powers. To mix

both those worlds, it's really difficult. You just have to understand how hard it is to have as much fun as we had and still keep the respect for what the comic-book genre has become. And it's like you said, with the *Batman* and *X-Men* movies, I frickin' love those movies, but you couldn't go that direction with this.

What do you think ultimately makes a great comic-book movie?
I think the real key is, you always have to keep it as real as possible. You always have to make sure that in most cases, even with a Superman for example, at the end of the day he's an alien. You have to deal with the fact of keeping it as real as possible. Always asking yourself, what would it have been if this really happened? What if a bunch of **astronauts** really went up into space and were hit by this storm, how would they really respond? Even in the design of what Ben Grimm looked like, we made it more real than it actually was in the comic book. You have to ask yourself, what would it be like if he really became a rock creature, what are the problems he'd run into now that his body is this way. And when Reed stretches, does it hurt? Her going invisible and him catching on fire, clothes burn off. What's happening to them, are they afraid of what's happening? You have to constantly keep asking yourself, what would it really be like, and just keep it as real as possible. When you do that, you connect more with the audience as opposed to them seeing a group of people where nothing affects them, they get all these powers and they're kind of like, whatever.

Well, whatever the key is, people sure do seem to like them—comic-book movies are really a staple of the movie-going experience now.
There are so many coming too. We're just being bombarded with everything. It's gonna be interesting to see how saturated things get and where we go from here. But they're definitely becoming a part of our culture when it comes to film. Now the special effects have caught up with the ideas, and you can do pretty much anything and everything. People are preparing to go in new directions and just do all this new stuff.

It's tough too, because you're battling with so much other media to maintain people's attention. Video games are a huge draw to keep people happy.
I think what comic-books will sometimes have more over things like video games—and that's definitely a big deal now, they're gonna be making movies out of every video game now—but what comics have is that there's so much detail put to their history, there's so much detail put to their characters and how they respond to each other and things like that. Video games, you really don't care that much about the history, you just want to get to the shooting. I was lucky to get one of the last remaining true, historic comic books, in the sense that your parents grew up with these people. It comes down to the characterization and the history. At the end of the day, no matter how many things you blow up, if you don't have a story and you don't connect with the characters, we just don't care. **play**

The Batman vs. Dracula

Starring: Batman, Joker, Penguin, Dracula, Vicki Vale
Directed by: Michael Goguen
Released By: Warner Bros. Home Video
Rated: NR

When he's not creating covers for Play or any number of comics and the like, Jeff Matsuda's other job is producing *The Batman* for Kids' (yeah right) WB along with the series' first spin-off movie The Batman vs. Dracula, which the Warner Bros. team somehow completed between seasons 2 and 3. For a spawned-from-TV-animation release (even more so than the impressive show), *Batman vs. Dracula* is an amazing piece of work, exuding the kind of quality and animation you'd expect from Disney DVD...only this is dark; darker than one might expect given it's based on a Saturday-morning series.
When Joker and Penguin both escape Arkham looking for the same loot hidden deep with a crypt at Gotham Cemetery, Penguin gets there first, and using his umbrella blade to pry open the coffin, slices open his hand, allowing a single drop of blood to pat the heart of Dracula who wastes no time turning Gotham into a city of ghouls when he's not scoping out Bruce Wayne's shapely love interest, Vicki Vale. Gotham's not big enough for two Dark Knights and Joker has yet to make his move. Look for some cool extras too, including an interactive Gotham City map. Get to know the place. Dave Halverson
Movie: B+ Extras: B

The Lost Ones (issue 15 in the Batman Strikes comic series) hits stands Nov. 9th. with a story parallel to the movie

Sin City Special Edition

Starring: Bruce Willis, Mickey Rourke, Clive Owen, Jessica Alba
Directed by: Robert Rodriguez, Frank Miller
Released By: Dimension
Rated: R

So you bought it already...Buy it again. Rarely is any special edition worth a repeat purchase but this is one of those times. All-Green Version gives you the entire film with zero effects, an Audience Version features live crowd reaction from the Austin Texas premiere, there's a 15-minute Flick School, and even a 10-minute Cooking School for Sin City Breakfast Tacos! ...For real. You gotta try these!! You can also watch all four acts your way or get into commentaries by Rodriguez, Willis, and Quentin Tarantino. Dave Halverson
Movie: A Extras: A

Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith

Starring: Ewan McGregor, Hayden Christensen, Natalie Portman
Director: Goerge Lucas
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

Star Wars has captured the hearts and minds (not to mention the wallets) of sci-fi fans ever since its 1977 premiere...so it's with heavy hearts and lowered lightsabers that we wave goodbye to George Lucas' space opera. Never again will we wait for 8 weeks in line to see a Star Wars premiere—however, that might be a good thing, because now we can watch it over, and over, and over... *RotS* is out on DVD, and now SW geeks can bask in all six films' glory in the comfort of their own home. The film itself still retains those wooden moments of dialogue everyone harps about, but it's the best of the prequels by far, without question. Anakin Skywalker's fall to the Dark Side is compelling, emotional, and definitely adds a new dynamic to the original trilogy. Where the 2-disc set really shines, however, is the insane set of special features LucasArts hath bestowed upon us. Keeping with the same format *Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* used, LucasArts packs *Episode III*'s extras content to the brim. There are featurettes on the fall of Anakin Skywalker and the *Making of Episode III*, and there's also "Within a Minute," a fascinating two-hour-long documentary about all the people and work it took to create just under 50 seconds of footage in *RotS*. Mix in some deleted scenes, a John Williams music video, a playable Battlefront II demo (you can pop the disc right into your Xbox) and exclusive PC content, and you've got a DVD that's sure to keep any Jedi-phile entertained for a light year. Ashley Esqueda
Movie: B+ Extras: A

Mr. & Mrs. Smith

Starring: Angelina Jolie, Brad Pitt, Kerry Washington
Directed by: Doug Liman
Released By: 20th Century Fox
Rated: PG-13

The charismatic sparring of Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie is entertainment enough to watch the raucous action-comedy *Mr. & Mrs. Smith*. The two mega stars, reveling in the playful absurdity of their roles, play a married couple on the verge of a nasty split who take their aggression out by attempting to assassinate each other. This makes total sense, see: they're assassins by profession, and it just so happens they've been surreptitiously hired to off the other, so why not turn the whole ordeal into high-stakes therapy? Director Doug Liman deftly slathers on the typical summer stunts and action, but it's his offbeat sensibility styling the story that keeps the film firing on all cylinders. Even when *Mr. & Mrs. Smith* treads too far into summer-blockbuster laziness—don't even try to make sense of the potholes in the script—its slick looks and big laughs are all you need.
Brady Fiechter
Movie: B Extras: B

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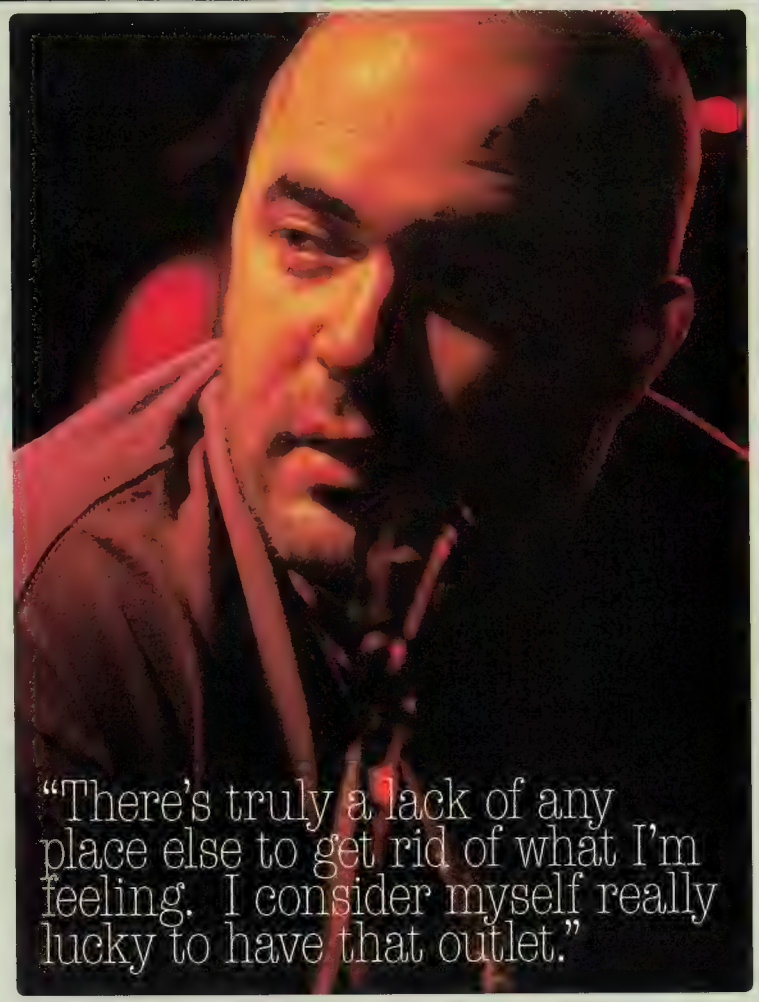
BACKSTAGE PASS

STAIND

Aaron Lewis

It's difficult to find a band as relevant as Staind. With the release of *Chapter V*, Staind debuted at #1 on the Billboard Top 200 Chart for the third consecutive time (*Break the Cycle*, in 2001 and *14 Shades of Grey*, in 2003 debuted at #1 as well). Add to that the album's hit single "Right Here," which helped to sell more than 185,000 copies during the first week of its release. This past September, the band tested their online gaming skills, competing against X-Boxers via Tiger Woods PGA Tour 2005. The competition was part of an Xbox live "Game with Fame" session. I caught up with the band's vocalist Aaron Lewis backstage in Grand Rapids, Michigan as Staind was in the midst of a tour with 3 Doors Down.

By Steven Douglas Losey



play: What's so special about *Chapter V*?
Aaron Lewis: We were forced to do things much more intensely than any time before. We had to do more takes. The takes had to be better. We ended up with a much better record than we've ever done before. I played guitar on most of the tracks. Before I was only playing acoustic. That's a little different. It adds a different texture because Mike [Mushok] has a particular style and way of doing things which tends to be different than I play. Our styles seem to compliment each other. We tried to utilize a lot of different amps and guitars and tones as well.

What is your playing style?
I tend to be more simplistic and follow the core and the root of the song. Mike is really good at writing lines that embellish. He tends to be a lot more intricate and knowledgeable than I am.

Why is writing lyrics important to you?
There's truly a lack of any place else to get rid of what I'm feeling. I consider myself really lucky to have that outlet. I don't know what I would do with all of that stuff that I constantly internalize and push down. It only comes out through me lyrically.

How would it rear its head without the lyrics?
Probably anger more than anything else. I think it would probably affect me in other areas of my life.

What pisses you off?
Just about everything. It's not being willing to settle for what's being put out there, for the options that are given in life.

What would you change then?
I'm just a man. I couldn't personally make those kinds of calls. There's so much that needs to change. I think that perception is just so off kilter as a whole.

Would you agree that it all starts with one voice?
My mom would agree.

You have an absolutely huge platform though.
The last thing I want to do is take advantage of the platform that I've been so reluctantly pushed into. I certainly don't feel that I'm important enough to have a platform like that. I'm just really lucky. I don't think people care about what I have to say.

How were you reluctantly put out there?
I don't feed on the celebrity of all of this. I don't like being the center of attention. It happens to be a by-product of what I do. It's hard enough for me to be comfortable in my own skin, forget about being on somebody else's pedestal.

So why aren't you comfortable in your own skin?
I don't know, twenty six years of life before I became known as the lead singer for Staind, that programmed me I guess.

Who is your hero?
My grandfather deserves that. He was 91 years old. I never heard him say a bad thing about anybody. I never saw him act any way but the perfect gentleman that he was. He was the quintessential, stereotypical, pipe smoking, grandpa, born in 1910, or something crazy like that. They don't make them like that anymore. He was nearly on his deathbed and they made a tape of him at the piano playing the most beautiful renditions of songs that I've ever heard.

Did he see Staind with a level of success?
He saw us at the Coral Sky Amphitheater in West Palm Beach. In the tape he made that day, he talked a lot about that show and that meant a lot to me.

Has there been a moment when you've looked at your band mates and thought, "we've really arrived here"?
One of those moments was in front of 90,000 people that had their lighters in the air. It was Fed Ex Field where the Redskins play. It was amazing.

Has being a rock star afforded you the chance to play with people that you never would have dreamed you'd play with?
All of them. We never dreamed we'd do what we've done. We've been saying that for six years and the ride hasn't stopped yet. I'm turning blue holding my breath. I've said it in songs. I'm afraid of waking, please don't shake me. At some point, I'm afraid that I'm going to wake up.

When you listen to Staind, it sounds like you could have come out of Seattle around the time that Nirvana did.
Thanks, all we've tried to do is write good music in a register I can sing in. That movement was a bunch of singers singing in their real voice rather than singing like a bunch of girls. I guess in that sense we've been reminiscent of that because I've never tried to sing out of my range.

It's like it's real music, filled with real emotions, sung by real people.
I think the real part of it is we've had some success but we haven't sold out to do it. We've done exactly what we started to do from the very beginning, but there are still people hating on us. It's de-motivating at times.

BACK OF THE BOOK

12_05 BRADY FIECHTER
EXECUTIVE EDITOR

Who needs new games anyway...

Years ago in my hometown, a local video-game shop opened its modest enterprise under a radical business model: buy and sell used video games. This seemed too good to be true: my friends and I could tear through our favorite game, sell it right back, buy the latest release used for a nice discount and turn around and do it all again ad nauseam? Incredible!

The business took off, more stores gradually started opening around the city and even across the state. I recall early conversations with the owner about how lucrative the used market could be—about how much more could be made purchasing a game used from a customer and turning it around for a much higher margin, rather than buying it wholesale from a publisher and selling it outright new. The catch would be getting in enough used games to consistently sell back, and in the end new games always triumphed because supply met with demand.

Today, that demand is starting to be met in far more substantial ways. It's a business reaching beyond a tiny entrepreneurial inroad and into multimillion-dollar corporate America, and for good reason. In a recent financial statement reflecting EB's sales patterns, you can see that 46.1 percent of company profits in the second quarter of this year came from used games, yet those games only made up 28.7 percent of total sales—this amidst falling sales of new games in general.

And now comes gigantor Best Buy eyeing a piece of the leftover pie, hinting at a full-fledged used-game section in their stores as they continue a test run already in a few locations. If the program takes off at Best Buy, how do its behemoth competitors not join in on the fun? The ramifications for publishers and developers is potentially huge, because not a single penny of used-games sales goes into their pockets. Responds one prominent game developer on his blog: "Why the f***k should we even try anymore?"

Making matters worse, you've got the brick-and-mortar and growing online rental services offering you new releases to keep for pretty much as long as you need to find full satisfaction, for dirt cheap. Back before the internet shook things up, I loathed the prospect of renting a game, confined to a two-day play period and the rush of driving it back to the store; now, if I wasn't fortunate enough to have access to so many games, I can tell you it'd be a rare day I walk into a retail store and shell out cash for a brand-new purchase instead of getting my fill the cheapest way possible. Given the concern of the industry, I'm obviously not an inconsequential minority. Speaking with one developer off the record, it was estimated that for every three gamers who played their latest release, two of them acquired it used or through a rental service.

Of course, it's nothing new to have access to entertainment through rental and used purchase, but the major squeeze on the games industry is that all its revenue is confined to straight sales. Musicians have concerts, movie studios have DVD and merchandising, among other things. There doesn't seem to be any logical solution on the table to the growing problem, and all this comes at a time when retail space continues to be paired down and more restrictive, and production budgets are skyrocketing.

> "Back before the internet shook things up, I loathed the prospect of renting a game."

As the next-generation approaches, some companies are talking about charging more for their games, which may or may not be an indirect response to the issue at hand. I've had countless arguments that raising prices is a myopic solution to a multi-pronged problem, and I tend to always be on the losing end (I say games need to be shorter, cheaper, and the selection cut in half!). Right or wrong, I do know paying more than 50 bucks is simply a deal-breaker given the current crop of games to choose from, and buying used or renting becomes less choice and more common sense.

Can you blame anyone for making that choice? This problem isn't so unlike what's facing the record and film companies, where the transformation of value, choice and satisfaction are the driving forces keeping people out of the theaters and music stores. The record industry suffers as consumers download and rip, as the options to do so continue to become more acceptable and more available. The scary thing for the games industry is that the suffering could just be beginning.

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